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BYZANTINE HISTORY AND CULTURE

The Avar Siege of Constantinople in 626

History and Legend

Martin Hurbanič

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The present book is primarily dedicated to the memory of my teacher, Professor Alexander Avenarius (1942–2004), who in his later years could once again vigorously support Byzantine studies at many Slovak universities once the ban imposed on him by the former Communist regime had been lifted. Professor Avenarius, a prominent expert on the history of Avars, sparked my interest in them many years ago.

Even though this publication came to life over the course of two years, it is a product of fifteen years' worth of research. I would like to point out that the final version's completion, including the English translation, was made possible mainly thanks to the financial support provided by the many projects sponsored by the Slovak Ministry of Education which I have taken part in, particularly KEGA 042UK-4/2018, VEGA 1/0814/18, KEGA 004UKF-4/2018, and APVV-18-0333.

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A NOTE ON THE TRANSCRIPTION

When transcribing most of the historical Greek proper names, I tended to opt for the original forms as opposed to their traditional Latinized or anglicized forms. Exceptions include first names that have been used in English over a long period of time as well as names of several famous persons of Byzantine history. In that case, I decided to go with their more common anglicized transcriptions. The same method was applied for several well-known topographic names and often used specific terms. The rest are written in their Greek forms. When dealing with the Russian personal names, I based their transcription on the English system of converting letters from Cyrillic (e.g., *š* = sh, *ž* = zh, *j* = y, and others). In the case of Serbian, Bulgarian, and Macedonian names, however, I went with their more commonly used forms of transcription (e.g., Barišić instead of Barishich, Barišic, or Barishic; Kašev instead of Kashev; and others). The titles of books and scholarly papers written by Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, and Macedonian authors were left in their original forms to aid interested readers in searching for them.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The Byzantines never forgot the first siege of Constantinople. In the hot summer days of 626, their capital was besieged by a huge horde of the Avars, Slavs, Bulgars, and others from land and sea. Moreover, the allied Persian army, led by the victorious commander Shahrbaraz, stood on the opposite side of the Bosphorus, ready to engage in this hard fight. The heroic ten-day-long defence lasted from Tuesday, 29 July, to Thursday, 7 August. The final victory of the Roman forces on the last day of the siege had a significant impact on contemporaries and transformed this historic event into a legend.

Its most visible sign was—more than anything else—the total destruction of the large “fleet” of dug-out canoes of the enemy in the bay of the Golden Horn. All people of the capital believed that this miraculous rescue of Constantinople was caused by the unexpected action of the Virgin Mary. The 7 August began to be regularly commemorated in the Byzantine liturgy and the short historical notices highlighting that divine help was read out in the church of Blachernai, the major Marian shrine in the capital, and later in other churches of Byzantium as well. This local commemoration was later replaced by the splendid Feast which united the memory of the three historical sieges of Constantinople. The people of the empire were told how the Mother of God had saved the Byzantine capital not only from the Avars but also from their successors, the Arabs, who twice unsuccessfully tried to conquer that God-protected city. This intense feeling was felt by all who entered the sacred space and listened to the

Akathistos, the most famous Marian hymn ever. It was due to popularity of this song that this homonymous feast soon crossed the borders of the Byzantine empire and became part of the shared cultural heritage of all countries of the Byzantine *oikoumene*. In such a way, the memory of the Avar attack is regularly reflected in the Byzantine liturgy and permanently preserved on frescoes and icons in various countries of the Greek Orthodox world. All these aspects make this event a unique historical moment in history: a moment in which the modern story overlaps with legend, with far-reaching ideological effect.

For the inhabitants of the Byzantine Empire, these two liturgical commemorations on the siege of 626 provided the only tangible memory on the Avars and their continuous devastating raids on the cities and provinces of the Balkans lasting from the second half of the sixth to the early seventh century.¹ The common belief that the divine protectors would again come to help Constantinople became a repeatedly experienced reality with every new threat. It gradually found reflection not only in the Byzantine liturgical texts but also in various other literary genres. The story of the Avar attack, as an unforgettable event in the history of Constantinople, was repeatedly recalled in times of trouble and military threat. But its written history soon emerged in a new garbled form. Instead of the Avars, the more amorphous Scythians appeared in the sources, while the Slavs, Bulgars and Gepids were often omitted from them. And in some cases, only the Persians are referred to as the only actors of that siege.²

The echoes of the Avar siege were still present in Constantinople centuries later, even though they had gradually adopted blurred contours. An anonymous Latin visitor of the Byzantine capital from the end of the eleventh century mentioned an attack of two armies, both on land and sea.³ In the middle of the fourteenth century, a pious Russian pilgrim saw a stack of exposed human bones near the disused harbour of Vlanga at the Marmara coast. He heard, probably from a local guide, that these remnants belonged to dead Persian soldiers who had perished when their vessels crashed against the city walls after the glorious intervention of the Mother of God.⁴ This story could not be true, but the inhabitants of Constantinople did not put much stress on the individual attacks of the barbarians.⁵ They rather focused on the spiritual presence of the Mother of God in “her” city as one anonymous Byzantine literate from the beginning of the fifteenth century. He even ascribed to her the ultimate victory of the last great nomad conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) over the Ottoman Sultan Bayezid in the glorious battle of Ankara in 1402. The anonymous

author mentioned that this miracle was greater than all the previous ones, including the one that had occurred during the attack of the Scythians (the Avars) and the Arabs on Constantinople, when the Mother of God “immersed them into the depth of the sea, destroyed them with death and hunger, and scourged them with other violent punishment”.⁶ The author of these words was convinced that the present hopeless situation of the Byzantines could not be compared to previous misfortunes because the recent miracle of the Virgin Mary surpassed all previous ones. Not only the arch-enemy, Bayezid, was captured, but also the innumerable hordes of Timur were later decimated by plague which prevented them to attack Constantinople. Even during the last hours of the Christian city on the Bosphorus, the ordinary people reportedly implored for divine help against the Turks, recalling the previous interventions of their patroness against the (Avar) khagan and the Arabs.⁷

All these reflections have their origin in the final day of the Avar siege. After departure of the Avars and their allies from the city, the people of Constantinople gathered in the main Marian shrine at Blachernai. In the interior of this sacral space, they thanked their patron whom they attributed the complete destruction of the enemy. Here begins the story of how the Avar attack became a part of the Byzantine identity. The transformation of this historical event into a legend is already visible in the works of two contemporary witnesses of the siege—George of Pisidia and Theodore Synkellos. They both definitively created the concept of a city protected by God with its chief patron in the person of the all-holy Mother of God. For Synkellos, Constantinople became the New Jerusalem, in other words, the better spiritual centre of the New Christian Israel.

Such claims were further reinforced by every subsequent attack on the Byzantine capital. In the final days of Constantinople, its inhabitants placed all their hope in the miraculous power of their Heavenly Patroness, especially in the time of the growing expansion of the Ottoman Turks. According to the common belief, the power of the Mother of God was mainly concentrated in her sacred icons. One of them, the Hodegetria, was considered as the most sacred palladion of Constantinople.⁸ At least from the eleventh century onwards, it was believed that it had been rescuing the city continuously since the first major attack by the Avars in 626. When this sacred image was destroyed on 29 May 1453 by Ottoman forces, it seemed as if the legend of the God-protected capital and the Avar siege had come to an end. Strangely enough, this did not happen even though the Byzantine Empire ceased to exist. The legend reappeared in

bizarre forms on the walls of monasteries, churches, and icon on Mount Athos as well as in today's republics of Macedonia, Romania, and Russia. It presented only a garbled memory of the Avar siege, perhaps except for the motif of the heavenly destruction of the enemy after the intervention of the most effective helper, the Mother of God, who, as in Constantinople, could demonstrate her power in cases of need. Its central element is the mystical belief in a miracle which mirrors the state of humanity at a time of crisis and existential threat.

But, the Avar attack on Constantinople is not only a peculiar testimony of Byzantine identity for its importance lies primarily in history. It is rightfully one of the most significant events of the seventh century and one of the key milestones of late antiquity. Undoubtedly it represents the peak of the expansion of the Avars to the Balkan provinces of the Eastern Roman Empire. This lasted for decades and caused a disruption to its political, military, economic, and religious structures. It would surely not be correct to perceive the Avar siege just as a heroic struggle of civilization against barbarism or as a fight between noble savages and the decadent and fragmented Roman Empire.⁹ It was not a mere consequence of the predatory politics of the Khaganate, nor was it an isolated, spontaneous, or unpredictable action. The Avars and their allies surrounded Constantinople at the time of the last great rivalry culminating between the traditional powers of late antiquity—the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia. The main adversaries—Emperor Herakleios and King Khusro II—made every effort to draw other actors into this conflict. The results of the siege meant a considerable blow to the power of the Khaganate and a definitive end of Avar hegemony in Southeastern Europe. On the other hand, from the perspective of the Eastern Roman Empire, this was the first serious attack and an attempt to destroy Constantinople, its capital city. It became a turning point of the last Roman–Persian war, also called the last great war of antiquity, a war that helped preserve the remains of the past Roman Empire in a new form—the Byzantium in the era, characterized by the expansive power of Islam. Therefore, it is not possible to properly interpret the history of the Avar attack unless the whole military and political context of this conflict is taken into consideration.

This book represents the first complex and interdisciplinary synthesis of the history and the legend of the Avar attack on Constantinople in 626 in the historiography. It introduces a comprehensive view of complicated relations between the Avars and other groups of warriors that took part in the attack. Their mutual relations and interaction before and during the

siege are outlined. It is followed by careful observations of the international situation in the world of late antiquity with its two dominant powers—the Eastern Roman Empire and the Persia. The monograph intends to answer the question of the extent to which the Avars and others were part of the “great power” policy of those times.

Beside of that, the military aspects of the siege have been discussed in detail, including those which have not been given due attention to so far. Therefore, two extensive chapters dedicated became inherent in the book. In the first, the structure of the Avar army is described. Possible relations between the Avars, Slavs, and others that participated in the attack are explored and suggested; the questions of weaponry and tactics of all troops belonging to the Avar army are elaborated. In the second chapter, the defence of Constantinople during the attack is analysed—not only its fortification but also the structure of the defence and its weaponry. In the core part of the book, the author attempts to answer questions about the aspects of the siege that have been omitted so far and reconstructs the story to the smallest detail.

Some statements regarding topographical objects that are mentioned during the siege are examined in detail. The first attempt is made to clarify some partial aspects of the naval defence of the city. Only through the evaluation of all the aspects, it is possible to answer the questions regarding the process and the effects of the siege in their complexity, not only from the military but also from the political perspective.

The second part of the book deals with the process of the continuous transformation of the historical event of the siege into a legend. The author of presented book follows this development in accordance with the chronological perspective (focussing on the gradual transformation of liturgical commemoration of the Avar attack) and with the thematic perspective (iconography of the Avar attack, liturgical processions and sacred relics used during the siege). Inherent in the monograph is a detailed commentary of all sources on the Avar siege and a critical assessment of the conclusions of historiography.

NOTES

1. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1980, 306.
2. In detail, cf. the chapter “The Memory of the Siege”.
3. *Anonymus Tarragonensis*, 128.392–400.
4. Stephen of Novgorod, 39.

5. For the comment regarding the origin of these bones, cf. Majeska 1984, 269–271.
6. *Diegesis* (1402), 114.17–19.
7. Doukas, 36.4, 317.
8. Cf. the chapter “The Spiritual Arsenal of the Siege”.
9. Cf. also Pohl 1988, 209.

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CHAPTER 2

The Memory of the Siege

Had the Avar siege of Constantinople taken place a few decades earlier, it could have been an attractive subject for some classicizing authors. The last historian of this kind, Theophylaktos Simokattes, spent his active career during the reign of Emperor Herakleios and was most likely an eyewitness to the Avar attack. As a well-informed person, he had access to archive material. If he had continued in his history, and if his account of the Avar siege of Constantinople had been preserved, his testimony would have become a source of major importance. It is likely that, in addition to the official material, he would have used testimonies of direct participants as well as taking his own experiences into consideration. Even without such testimony, there are three contemporary sources to the Avar siege whose authenticity has been underlined by the fact that the authors most likely witnessed the events taking place. Given that the various themes within these works will be dealt with in different parts of this book, it suffices here to just provide some basic information about them.¹

PRIMARY SOURCES

Most information on the Avar siege is provided by its detailed report which was included in the Paschal Chronicle, compiled after 630.² This report is detailed, concise, and factual. It includes the precise titles and ranks of Roman officials and an expert description of individual events.³

The story is described comprehensively and in a precise chronological manner. The anonymous compiler of the Paschal Chronicle probably had at his disposal an official letter composed by the members of the regency council of Constantinople which was addressed to the Emperor Herakleios after the end of the siege.⁴ The question is whether the compiler of the chronicle transcribed this report verbatim or just took excerpts from it. Since the manuscript of the Paschal Chronicle was already damaged in the tenth century, it is possible that a later copyist simply left out some illegible passages.⁵ Indications of that can be seen in the introductory part of the report and in its end consisting mainly of additional notices.⁶ Moreover, there is an extensive lacuna in this report caused by one missing folio where the key events from the dawn of 4 August to the morning of 7 August 626 were described.⁷

Another contemporary source on the Avar siege is an anonymous homily which has been ascribed to Theodore Synkellos, who was the deacon and presbyter of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.⁸ Synkellos witnessed the Avar attack and was one of the envoys who had unsuccessfully negotiated with the Avar khagan on Saturday 2 August 626.⁹ The homily was presumably written on the occasion of the first anniversary of the siege or a little bit later.¹⁰ It is the only contemporary source that describes the whole course of the siege. Despite its rhetorical character, this homily contains some details not found in other sources. But Synkellos was a cleric, and one could not expect an accurate account of events from him. He did not like to narrate this story in detail, as his listeners undoubtedly already knew very well what had happened. Synkellos primarily wanted to emphasize the supernatural salvation of Constantinople through the intervention of the Mother of God. According to him, that act was the most vivid evidence of the spiritual prevalence of the Christian religion and its centre, the New Jerusalem (Constantinople) over the Judaism and the Jerusalem of old.¹¹

The third contemporary testimony is an epic poem composed in iambic trimeter which is usually referred to as “The Avar War” (*Bellum Avaricum*); it was presumably written soon after the end of the siege.¹² The author of this poem was George (d. after 632) from Antioch in Pisidia, a deacon of the Hagia Sophia who held many administrative positions in the patriarchate of Constantinople.¹³ He was probably also an eyewitness of the Avar attack, which he outlined in the concluding part of this poem. Unlike Synkellos, he focused only on selected motifs of the

siege, some of which were not mentioned in other contemporary sources or only briefly touched upon. These notices are valuable though their interpretation is sometimes complicated and obscured by poetic imagery used by the author. Among others, these included the mention of the written instructions that the Emperor Herakleios sent to the defenders of Constantinople before the beginning of the Avar siege, or description of religious procession of the patriarch Sergios with a miraculous image of Christ at the beginning of the Avar attack. Compared to other contemporary authors, George of Pisidia paid the most attention to the final naval battle in the Golden Horn on 7 August. Like Synkellos, he attributed a key role in the victory to the miraculous intervention of the Mother of God, but he described the whole story in a different way.¹⁴ Despite that, certain motifs of his poem are close to Synkellos's homily, but it is hard to determine the question of primacy since both authors belonged to the intellectual circle of the patriarch Sergios, and they almost certainly influenced each other.¹⁵

In addition to the Avar War, George of Pisidia briefly touched upon this theme in some of his other historical poems as well.¹⁶ He was certainly the author of the three short iambic poems (epigrams) which are preserved in the well-known codex *Bibliotheca Palatine*.¹⁷ Two of them were originally inscribed in the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai. The first one was situated on the narthex of its Chapel (Hagios Soros). It mentions the emperors in plural (probably Herakleios and his son and regent Herakleios Constantine present during the Avar siege in Constantinople) and the patriarch (Sergios) as well as the barbarians who suffered defeat after the miraculous intervention of the Mother of God.¹⁸ The localization of the second poem/inscription is disputed, but it recalls the destruction of the enemy through the water.¹⁹ Both poems undoubtedly refer to the Avar siege, and identification with other attacks on Constantinople, such as by the Rhos in 860, is unfounded.²⁰ The third poem commemorated the successful counterattack of the defenders of Constantinople near the Church of Theotokos at Pege on the third day of the Avar siege.²¹

As a contemporary source of that attack is also considered the second prologue of the Akathistos hymn, as its authorship is sometimes attributed to the patriarch Sergios.²² Unlike others, I believe that such classification results from a retrospective historical projection heavily influenced by the later Byzantine liturgical tradition.²³

BYZANTINE CHRONOGRAPHY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

In addition to the primary sources, there are two later important works with a valuable historical reference to the Avar attack. The first of them is the *Historia Syntomos* written by the Constantinopolitan patriarch Nikephoros at the end of the eighth century.²⁴ Nikephoros gained information on the Avar attack from a unique but now lost source dated to the mid-600s.²⁵ Unlike the contemporary testimonies, it focused almost exclusively on the final naval attack of the Slavs and others in the Golden Horn. The anonymous author of this story saw the ultimate reason of their failure in the clever stratagem of the military commander of Constantinople Bonos who with his prematurely given signal confused the attacking Slavic canoes. However, this interpretation of the final attack, not supported by the contemporary sources, is very problematic, as shall be made clear in the relevant parts of this book.²⁶

The last important narrative account of the Avar attack contains the *Chronographia* of Theophanes, covering the period from the accession of Diocletian to 813.²⁷ Theophanes had two sources at his disposal and he tried to logically connect them. The first of these is a short summary of the attack which contains two additional pieces of information. Its anonymous author mentioned the participation of the Gepids in the siege and added that Herakleios divided his army into three parts, with one being sent to Constantinople before the beginning of the Avar attack.²⁸ At the end of this summary, this anonymous source outlines the fate of the Persian army of Shahrbaraz after the failure of the siege.²⁹ Theophanes sought to harmonize this account with his second source, probably Middle Eastern dossier written in Greek which was also used by Syriac chroniclers.³⁰

Concise reports on the Avar siege of 626 appeared also in most Byzantine chronicles from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries. Such records are usually based either on accounts of Theophanes or Patriarch Nikephoros. The first of these can be found in the chronicle of George Monachos (Hamartolos), compiled around the second half of the ninth century and covering the history from Creation to 842.³¹ Monachos drew his information from Nikephoros, but he added that the victory belonged primarily to the citizens of Constantinople, who had slain thousands of Avars in battle and driven others back to their homeland.³² A very similar report is found in another Byzantine chronicle, whose authorship is attributed to Symeon Magister and Logothetes (compiled after 959).³³ The only difference is the mention of the patrician Bonos and the patriarch

Sergios alongside the citizens of Constantinople. The next in line is the Brussels Chronicle (*Chronicon Bruxellense*) which briefly summarizes history from Julius Caesar to 1034.³⁴ The information of the Avar attack is preserved in the form of a short notice mentioning an attack on Constantinople led by the Persian commander Sarbaros (Shahrbaraz) and the Avar khagan.³⁵

At the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the otherwise unknown George Kedrenos compiled a Chronicle, starting from Creation to 1057.³⁶ Kedrenos copied the information of the Avar attack word by word from Theophanes, but he added a legendary story of a female figure who revealed herself to the enemy at an unnamed gate of Blachernai.³⁷ According to this, the Avars thought that the wife of Emperor Herakleios had come to negotiate a peace. When they began to pursue her, she disappeared unexpectedly along with her guide in a place called Palaia Petra (the Old Rocks).³⁸ In the confusion that followed, the barbarians killed each other and their leader (the khagan) returned to his land in shame. The remaining attackers on the boats were hit by a storm on the Black Sea. This version of the miraculous rescue of Constantinople is not found in any of the Byzantine sources, and its origin remains unknown.

Another brief report on the Avar attack is contained in the extensive chronicle of John Zonaras (from Creation to 1118).³⁹ As such, it is very close to the reports of George Monachos and Symeon Magister and Logothetes. Due to the absence of a defending army, victory is attributed solely to the brave men of the city led by the patrician Bonos and a patriarch who is, however, not named.⁴⁰

In the twelfth century, Constantine Manasses mentioned the Avar attack in his chronicle in verse, which covers the period from Creation until the beginning of the reign of Alexios I Komnenos in 1081.⁴¹ Manasses was clearly inspired by “The Avar War” by George of Pisidia, as is evident from some of the common phrases and by the comparison of the attacking enemies to Scylla and Charybdis.⁴² Like his distant predecessor, Manasses focused on the final naval battle in the Golden Horn. He refers to the Avars by their original name, but probably for Slavs, he used more archaic terms like “Scythians” or “Tauroscythians”.⁴³ The report of the Avar siege by Manasses contains no additional information, but it is valuable from the literal point of view.

Two anonymous thirteenth-century chronicles also briefly refer to the Avar attack. The first of these, *Chronika* (Vat. gr. 1889), covers Byzantine history from the creation of the world to 1118. The second one, *Synopsis*

Chronike, which is a more extensive version of the former, continues up to 1261. The authorship of these chronicles is largely, but not unanimously, attributed to the Metropolitan of Kyzikos, Theodore Skoutariotes.⁴⁴ In both chronicles, there is a brief notice about the attack of the Scythians (Avars) on the western walls of Constantinople and the subsequent miracle caused by the liturgical procession of the patriarch Sergios.⁴⁵ These reports present the perspective of later Byzantine authors. In this context, there is no mention of a naval attack by Slavic boats but by Russian ones.⁴⁶ Undoubtedly, this was just an anachronism and not evidence of the actual participation of Russians in the Avar siege. For the first time in the Byzantine chronography, there is mention of the Akathistos hymn which was reportedly sung during an all-night service of thanksgiving organized by the patriarch Sergios.⁴⁷ The post-Byzantine reports of the Avar siege are basically short summaries of the previous sources.⁴⁸

The only classicizing historian who has a motif of the Avar siege is Doukas (d. after 1462). In the thirty-sixth chapter of his “History”, he describes the circumstances regarding the declaration of the Florentine Union in Constantinople on 12 December 1452. Its opponents, led by the monk and later Patriarch of Constantinople, Gennadios, gathered in the courtyard of the Pantokrator Monastery before the act of union took effect and anathematized its content. Subsequently, the laymen split up into adjoining taverns where they drank to the intercession of the icon of the Mother of God and beseeched her to save the city as she had in the times of the (Persian) king Chosroes, the khagan, and the Arabs.⁴⁹ By mentioning the title of the Avar leader, the people of the Byzantine capital recalled the first siege of Constantinople commemorated during the Feast of the Akathistos by putting their hope in the most venerated palladium of the city—the icon of the Hodegetria.

NON-CHRONOGRAPHICAL BYZANTINE SOURCES

The Liturgical Readings

Short entries, which briefly mentioned the commemoration of the important church feasts and various events, form a special group of Byzantine sources on the Avar siege. These notices were a long-standing and core part of Byzantine liturgy and were read out on the day of the commemoration of each saint or important church feast.⁵⁰ Originally, they were written in gospel books as their introductory or concluding parts.⁵¹ In

Byzantium, the Avar siege was commemorated every year on 7 August which was the day of the decisive victory in the Golden Horn. The first notice of its annual commemoration is contained in the Lectionary preserved in cod. Vat. gr. 2144 dated to the beginning of the ninth century.⁵²

In the second half of the tenth century, the short commemorative entries describing the historical background of this attack appeared. They became part of a new type of liturgical collection known as the *Synaxarion* which was compiled at the behest of Emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos.⁵³ At first, the Synaxarion was only used for the liturgical purposes of the Church of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, but later its use spread beyond the borders of the Byzantine Empire. One of its versions (*Synaxarium Sirmondianum*), now better known as the *Berolinensis Phil 1622* (219), dates to the twelfth to thirteenth centuries and was edited in the early twentieth century by the Belgian Jesuit Hippolyte Delehaye.⁵⁴

Although this version is not the oldest one, it contains a complete calendar of the Byzantine church year along with its individual commemorative entries. Delehaye also considered other manuscripts of the Constantinopolitan Synaxarion and published different recensions of these texts. In addition to the Sirmondian version (BHG 1063b),⁵⁵ the notice of the Avar siege is preserved in two other recensions. The first of these contained the Leipzig version from 1172 (*Lipsiensis R II 25*), originally from the Monastery of Saint Giorgio di Tucco in Calabria.⁵⁶ The second recension comes from the *Parisinus Graecus* codex of 1587 from the twelfth century, which contains liturgical readings for the second half of the Byzantine church year (March–September).⁵⁷

The postulated archetype for all three texts was either the homily attributed to Theodore Synkellos or its epitomes. The entry of the Avar siege preserved in the Sirmondian version shows several common motifs with the version of *Parisinus Graecus* of 1587. They both mentioned the arrival of the Persian commander Sarbaros (*Shahrbaraz*) to Chalcedon and that of the Avar khagan to Thrace at the time of Herakleios's invasion of Persia, the Avar attack by land and sea, the unsuccessful negotiations in the Avar camp, and the khagan's demand for the Constantinopolitans to leave the city. A central theme of both recensions is the defeat of the Scythian (Slavic) dugout canoes at the decisive moment of the siege and the establishment of an annual church service commemorating this victory in the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai. Some other motifs appear in the Leipzig recension of the Constantinopolitan Synaxarion (cod. *Lipsiensis*

R. II. 25); these include the successful counterattack near the Monastery of the Mother of God at Pege on the third day of the siege and the liturgical procession led by the patriarch Sergios.⁵⁸

A typologically related text to this recension is an anonymous text called *Historia Syntomos* (BHG 1062), edited by the Polish philologist L. Sternbach at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ Sternbach used a parchment codex (Vind, Gr. 45, 98r–99r), which, unlike other texts, commemorates the attack on 8 August, that is, on the day of departure of the Avars and their allies from Constantinople.⁶⁰ The anonymous narrative in this codex is part of the Menologion for August, and according to the type of script, it dates back to the eleventh century.⁶¹ Currently, there are two other known manuscripts containing this text. The first one (Vaticanus Graecus 2014, ff. 115v–117r) dated to the thirteenth century.⁶² The last version is preserved in the manuscript Cod. Andros 65, which contains an incomplete version of *Historia Syntomos*.⁶³

The anonymous compiler of *Historia Syntomos* drew on Synkellos's homily, or its epitomes, and probably on other sources as well. Its introduction is almost literally identical to the Leipzig version of the Constantinopolitan Synaxarion. However, there are slight additions regarding the procession of the patriarch Sergios, as the compiler of *Historia Syntomos* mentions other sacred objects in his narrative. In addition to the final miracle of the Mother of God in the Golden Horn, the second part of *Historia Syntomos* gives a historical summary of the final episodes of the last war of antiquity. It briefly mentions Herakleios's invasion to Persia, his alliance with the Caucasian Lazi and Iberians, the death of King Khusro II, the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem, and the triumphant entry of Herakleios into Constantinople. On the contrary, the Leipzig version only briefly touches on these events.⁶⁴

A short entry on the Avar siege can be found in the Menologion of Emperor Basil II. This type of liturgical book usually denotes collection of the non-abridged lives of saints and other commemorative events.⁶⁵ Unlike this, the Menologion of Basil II is another example of the Synaxarion for the first half of the Byzantine church year (1 September–28 February) which was compiled by an anonymous cleric after 976.⁶⁶ Here the siege is commemorated on 7 August under the title “Memory of the Defeat of the Avars and Persians”.⁶⁷ In this entry, the Avars are called by their original names and not as “Scythians”. Their leader attacked Constantinople by land and sea, but the patriarch and the people of God organized a liturgical procession and expelled the enemies. The end of the text says, “Out of thanks, the city arranges a liturgical procession.”⁶⁸

Synaxaria-Typika (Synaxiaria with Liturgical Rubrics)

Another type of Synaxarion preserving the memory of the Avar attack is the Synaxarion-Typikon (also named as a Synaxarion with liturgical rubrics) of the Hagia Sophia.⁶⁹ In addition to the brief lists of memorial days, this collection contains liturgical arrangements for a particular day, that is, information about stationary processions and the locations where they took place.⁷⁰ The Synaxarion-Typikon of Constantinopolitan cathedral liturgy has been preserved in its entirety in two manuscripts. The older one (Patmos 266) originated in Palestine in around 900.⁷¹ For 7 August, there is notice of the attack of the barbarians (Avars and others), who, thanks to the intercessions of the Holy Mother of God, were drowned in the bay (the Golden Horn).⁷² Similar information is given in another manuscript from Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai. It states that on 7 August, the attack of the Avars was commemorated in the times of Emperor Herakleios and the patriarch Sergios.⁷³

A brief description of the liturgical procession commemorating this event is given in the second variant of the Constantinopolitan Synaxarion-Typikon of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate in Jerusalem (Hagios Stauros 40).⁷⁴ This was presumably the official liturgical book of the Hagia Sophia compiled between 950 and 959.⁷⁵ The Avar siege is commemorated on 7 August. According to the text, victory was achieved with the help of Christ (not the Mother of God) against the enemies who had surrounded Constantinople by land and sea.⁷⁶

Both these variants of the Synaxarion-Typikon also contain liturgical instructions for celebrating the Feast of the Akathistos, which also commemorated the Avar siege.⁷⁷ The Synaxarion-Typikon (Hagios Stauros 40) explicitly states that the all-night service was a reminder of the salvation of Constantinople, which had been besieged at various times by the Persians and barbarians.⁷⁸

Historical Prologues to the Feast of the Akathistos

Another category of sources on the Avar siege represent the two historical prologues written for the occasion of the Feast of the Akathistos, during which the first three sieges of Constantinople were commemorated.⁷⁹ The older of these texts is now mostly referred to as the *Diegesis Ophelimos* (Useful narration, BHG 1060), according to the two introductory words of the extensive prologue which is found in many codices.⁸⁰

The Diegesis is essentially a sermon (logos), which was read out during the Feast of the Akathistos. The narration on the Avar attack forms the first part of the Diegesis, which is an abridged version of a homily ascribed to Theodore Synkellos. Two other parts of this text commemorated the two Arab sieges of Constantinople during the reign of Constantine IV, referred to as Pogonatos (traditionally, albeit incorrectly dated to 674–678) and the second one at the beginning of the reign of Leon III (717/718). The summary of the first Arab siege of Constantinople is based on the *Chronographia* of Theophanes.⁸¹ By describing the second siege of 717/718, the compiler mentioned 1800 Arab ships which took part in this attack, while referring to “industrious chroniclers”.⁸² Such number of ships has also the patriarch Nikephoros as well as Theophanes.⁸³ Therefore, the Diegesis had to have been compiled after the completion of the works of Patriarch Nikephoros and Theophanes.⁸⁴ Beside of that, this text should contain also other chronological indications; however, these are more problematic. Such is above all the vague mention of internal disruptions in the Byzantine empire, which M. Théarvic connected with the rebellion of Thomas the Slav (821–823).⁸⁵ At present, the Diegesis is usually dated to the second half of the ninth century.⁸⁶

Its oldest manuscripts come from the tenth and eleventh centuries, and their considerable number supports its wide use and popularity.⁸⁷ In most of the oldest codices, the Diegesis is present as part of the ninth or ninth/tenth volume of the famous Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes, which is the huge liturgical collection of the non-abridged commemorative entries, compiled between 976 and 1004.⁸⁸ However, it seems that the Diegesis was probably not widespread before its inclusion in the Metaphrastic Menologion.⁸⁹

Diegesis was originally considered to be a supplement to the contemporary sources on the Avar siege. However, it appears to be just an epitome of Synkellos’s homily except for introductory part where the historical background to the Avar attack is explained. The mention of various liturgical objects carried in the procession by the patriarch Sergios is a mere interpolation included by the compiler of the Diegesis or author of its original source.⁹⁰ Unlike the homily of Synkellos, much more emphasis is given to the final miracle in the Golden Horn with the motif of a strong windstorm which sank the dugout boats of the enemy.⁹¹

The second historical prologue to the Feast of the Akathistos (BHG 1063) is usually referred to as the *Lectio Triodii* and only traditionally dated to the fourteenth century.⁹² Like the Diegesis, it describes the

miraculous salvation of Constantinople during its first three sieges. The *Lectio Triodii* is bound to the Byzantine Triodion cycle, which contains instructions for church services in the ten weeks preceding Easter. Its narration on the Avar attack is very close to that of the *Diegesis*; however, there are only rare traces of identical passages. Compared to the *Diegesis*, the *Lectio* is a much more compressed text, although it contains some additional motifs. These include information about the melting down of church property by Emperor Herakleios for the needs of his Persian campaign as well as mention of a peace treaty between Herakleios and the new Persian king, Kavad-Shiroe.⁹³ The compiler of the *Lectio* apparently found these notices in other sources, presumably in the *Historia Syntomos* of the patriarch Nikephoros or the *Chronographia* of Theophanes.⁹⁴ In the narration of the Avar siege, all important motifs are mentioned. The attack was carried out by the “khagan of the Scythians and Mysians”, as the compiler anachronistically referred to the Avar leader.⁹⁵ At the end of this part, unlike in the *Diegesis*, he emphasizes the singing of the Akathistos after the end of this siege.⁹⁶

Homilies and Miracula

In addition to the homily (BHG 1061) attributed to Theodore Synkellos, Byzantine literature contains other examples of the same genre with the topic of the Avar siege. The oldest among such texts presents a homily (BHG 1130s) which, upon the basis of one of its versions (Vatopedi 633, dated to 1422), is attributed to the Constantinopolitan patriarch Germanos.⁹⁷ According to the title, it is a panegyric and an expression of thanks to the Mother of God for having saved Constantinople from the attacks of the enemies (the Saracens, Avars, and Slavs being mentioned). The edition of the homily was based on the manuscript of Lavra Δ 79 by V. Grumel, who also took other manuscripts into account.⁹⁸ In these, the homily is attached to the Feast of the Assumption of the Holy Mother, only in the Vatopedi codex to the Feast of the Akathistos.⁹⁹ Grumel considered its author to be the Constantinopolitan patriarch Germanos I, while assuming that it had been written some years after the end of the Arab siege in 717/718.¹⁰⁰ P. Speck takes a reserved position on such a conclusion. He points out the higher literary style of the homily (Atticist prose) in contrast to the other literary works of Germanos, which were written in Patristic Koine Greek. Furthermore, he pointed out the absence of any specific information on the Arab siege of 717/718.¹⁰¹ Upon the

basis of these arguments, Speck came to the conclusion that the homily was either a later product from the ninth century which was attributed to Germanos by mistake, or an example of an academic rhetorical exercise.¹⁰² But, as D. Reinsch remarked, the stylistics and lexis in other works which are attributed to Germanos are not of a uniform nature, not even within particular texts.¹⁰³ Reinsch accepted Speck's doubts concerning Germanos's authorship but considers this homily as an anonymous work of his contemporary. Finally, he added that examples of a higher literary style can also be found in works from that period.¹⁰⁴

The homily of Germanos, or rather Ps.-Germanos, discusses the Avar attack in its sixteenth and seventeenth chapters, where it is stated that the same miracle (the sinking of the Arab fleet) had already happened with the numerous Avar forces backed up by Slavs who had come into the Golden Horn in dugout canoes.¹⁰⁵ The most important statement in the homily is that Constantinople did not have any sea walls at the time of the Avar siege.¹⁰⁶ This problem will be discussed in more detail in another part of this book.¹⁰⁷ The motif of the annual celebration and the all-night singing is rather related to the Avar siege than to the Arab one.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, some indications suggest that the author of this homily could indeed be the witness of the Arab siege of Constantinople in 717/718, for he compares the recent miracle of the Mother of God with that during the Avar siege, pointing out that it had happened "in our times".¹⁰⁹ The author also called the Avars by their proper name and did not follow the classicizing tradition of Synkellos's homily which referred to them as "Scythians".¹¹⁰

Another homily which presents the motif of the Avar siege, this time related to the Feast of the Akathistos, can be found in a codex from the first half of the thirteenth century (cod. Vindob. theol. gr. 134, BHG 1101),¹¹¹ written in the Monastery of Stoudios by the monk Antonios Tripsychos.¹¹² The first editor of this text, L. Sternbach, identified the author as the Constantinopolitan patriarch Antonios III Stoudites and assumed that the sermon was first read out in 971 on the occasion of the Feast of the Akathistos in the Blachernai church during the reign of Emperor John I Tzimiskes.¹¹³ In 1903 this view was challenged by A. Papadopoulos-Kerameus who published its corrected version.¹¹⁴ He dated it to the reign of the Emperor Isaac II Angelos.¹¹⁵ This is supported by the fact that the Byzantine aristocratic family of Tripsychos is mentioned in chronicles and on the seals only in the era of the Komnenoi and Angeloi dynasties.¹¹⁶

Tripsychos recalls the Avar siege as the first of the miracles of the Mother of God. The Persians and Scythians had surrounded the imperial capital in countless numbers in the same way Sennacherib had attacked Jerusalem.¹¹⁷ The arrogance of the enemy did not go unanswered, and thanks to the prayers of the inhabitants of the tormented city to the Mother of God, the barbarians were finally destroyed.¹¹⁸

In addition to the Avar siege, Tripsychos mentions the “seven-year long siege” laid by the Arabs (usually dated to 674–678).¹¹⁹ After these historical events which, as the author says, were “told to us by our fathers”,¹²⁰ there is an immediate shift to the contemporary miracles of the Mother of God. They were evident in the emperor’s victory over the Latins, Scythians, and Bulgars.¹²¹ Papadopoulos-Kerameus associates these references with the success of the Byzantine armies of the Emperor Isaac II Angelos against the Norman King William II of Sicily (1166–1189) and the rebellious Bulgars and Vlachs led by Peter (Theodor) and (John) Asen.¹²² However, the central miracle performed by the Mother of God and mentioned by Tripsychos undoubtedly concerns the salvation of Constantinople. Papadopoulos-Kerameus pointed to a passage describing a rebellion which was supposed to take the God-given empire from Isaac and connected it to the attack of the usurper Alexios Branas in 1187. The Greek scholar then dated the composition of the homily after the end of victorious campaign of the Emperor Isaac against the Bulgars and Vlachs in the spring of 1188.¹²³

A unique account of the miraculous salvation of Constantinople from the Avars and Persians contains the hagiographic collection of *The Miracles of Archangel Michael* (BHG 1285–1288), variously dated to the mid-ninth or the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries. According to manuscript tradition, the authorship of this collection has been attributed to Pantaleon, the skeuophylax and deacon of the Hagia Sophia.¹²⁴ The short story of the Avar siege has been recently published by G. Tsiaples upon the basis of the oldest preserved manuscript (Parisinus Graecus 1510 fol. 94v–95r).¹²⁵ Here the central figure in saving the city is not the Mother of God but Archangel Michael. During the litany in the Blachernai church, the Mother of God instructed her archistrategos to intervene against the attacking barbarians.¹²⁶ The archangel appeared as a fire-like man bearing flames; he came out of the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai, struck at the enemy, and destroyed a huge number of them: more than 185,000 Assyrians (of King Sennacherib). The remaining Avars fled to Scythia.¹²⁷ Michael also caused destruction to the Persians who had reached

Chalcedon with the aim of taking Constantinople.¹²⁸ A similar version of this story can be found by the Greek preacher and metropolitan Damaskenos Stoudites (c. 1500–1577) and finally in the Synaxarion of the Orthodox Church (8 November).¹²⁹ The motif of the miraculous rescue of Constantinople from the attacking Persians is also found in the well-known *Hermeneia* (Painter's manual) of the Greek painter and monk Dionysios of Fourná (c. 1670–c. 1745).¹³⁰

The miraculous intervention of Archangel Michael is somewhat reminiscent to the already mentioned appearance of the Mother of God as an unknown female figure during the Avar siege in the chronicle of George Kedrenos. The attribution of the salvation of Constantinople from the Avars to Michael is unique, and it differs from the rest of the Byzantine hagiographic tradition. Tsiaples draws attention to the mention of the destruction of Thrace, preserved in *The Miracles of Archangel Michael*, and connects it to the earlier attack of the Avars on Constantinople in 623, during which the Church of the Archangel Michael in the Promotos was damaged. According to Tsiaples, the miraculous appearance of Archangel Michael during the siege in 626 may be understood as a form of revenge for the destruction of his shrine during the previous Avar incursion.¹³¹

The motif of the Avar attack is also most likely reflected in a homily (BHG 1140) whose authorship is currently attributed to the Nicene Emperor Theodore II Doukas Laskaris (1254–1258).¹³² The connection of this sermon to the Feast of the Akathistos and some motifs, such as the sinking of the boats in a fate similar to that of the Pharaoh's army, points to an Avar attack.¹³³ However, the author of this homily states that the attack was made by the Rhos and that the sinking of the enemy fleet was caused by a procession with the girdle (belt) of the Mother of God.¹³⁴ The mention of "Russian attackers" is most likely an anachronism of that author, who, like other Byzantine writers, identified the Scythians (Avars or Slavs) as "Russians". Laskaris was certainly not referring to the Russian attack on Constantinople in 860, because that never became a part of the commemoration of the Feast of the Akathistos.¹³⁵ On the other hand, the motifs of these two military attacks appeared side by side in the later Byzantine tradition, as it will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters.

In the fourteenth century, the Avar siege was dwelt upon by Antonios, the Metropolitan of Larissa (1333–1363 or 1340–1362), a relatively obscure Byzantine writer whose life we know about only thanks to eighteen preserved homilies which were mostly about feasts dedicated to Jesus Christ and the Mother of God.¹³⁶ One of them (BHG 1123p) deals with

the miracles of the Mother of God which were shown to the people of Constantinople at various times in history.¹³⁷ In terms of content, this sermon is very close to the already referred *Diegesis Ophelimos*. Both texts contain practically the same historical facts concerning the first three sieges of Constantinople and the same biblical quotations. It is therefore highly likely that the *Diegesis* served as an archetype for Antonios, and that his own sermon was written for the Feast of the Akathistos. Antonios delivered it either in Trikala, which was the central residence of the metropolitans of Larissa at that time, or in Thessalonica.¹³⁸

The last example of narration on the miraculous salvation of Constantinople which includes the Avar siege is the anonymous Sermon on the Miracles of the Mother of God in the Times of Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (BHG 1063z).¹³⁹ The central theme is the ending of the long blockade of Constantinople by the Ottoman Turks led by Sultan Bayezid I (1394–1402). The text is preserved only in two manuscripts: a primary one (Vindob. supplem. gr. 75) and a secondary one (Ambrosianus Graecus 598), where the central part of the text is damaged.¹⁴⁰ H. Hunger attributed authorship of the sermon to John Chortasmenos, a professor of rhetoric and later the metropolitan of Selymbria.¹⁴¹ However, its proper editor, P. Gautier, doubted these conclusions and considered the author as an anonymous witness of described events. He then dated the text to between 1405 and 1411.¹⁴² The sermon refers to the Avar siege of Constantinople on two occasions. The first time is in relation to the Byzantine embassy to Bayezid, who reportedly behaved to the envoys worse than the (Avar) khagan had. The anonymous author undoubtedly referred to the arrogance of the Avar leader towards the Constantinopolitan envoys who had arrived in his camp on 2 August 626.¹⁴³ The second reference to the Avar attack deals with it in more detail. Here the author emphasizes the unexpected ending of the blockade of Constantinople by the Ottomans caused by an invasion of Turkic-Mongol forces led by Timur. The battle of Ankara in 1402 resulted in the capture of Bayezid and the weakening of the Ottoman Empire as well as the premature death of Timur, meaning that Constantinople was spared from both threats. According to that anonymous author, this blockade had posed a greater danger than the siege of Constantinople in the times of Emperor Herakleios when the Persians had penetrated as far as Chalcedon and the Scythians (Avars) had plundered Thrace.¹⁴⁴ Here he also mentioned two Arab sieges of Constantinople during the reigns of Constantine IV and Leon III. Together with the Avar attack, they were commemorated in the late Byzantine period during the Feast of the Akathistos.

Varia

The motif of the Avar siege also appears in the letter of the Constantinopolitan patriarch Nicholas Mystikos to the Bulgarian ruler Symeon.¹⁴⁵ Probably in September 917, Mystikos reacted on the great defeat of the Byzantine army (probably near Anchialos on 20 August), and reminded Symeon that Constantinople was under the protection of the Mother of God, pointing out the previous unsuccessful sieges of the Byzantine capital.¹⁴⁶ The patriarch mentioned both Persians and Avars but he surprisingly considered their attacks as two separate military actions.¹⁴⁷ He also referred to the Arabs who attacked Constantinople over a period of seven years. That information had already appeared in Theophanes's chronicle, but a connection between the Avar, Persian, and Arab attacks is only expressed in the *Diegesis Ophelimos*.¹⁴⁸ Such a mention may therefore be further early evidence of the existence of the Feast of the Akathistos as a new celebration where the first three sieges of Constantinople were united.

A marginal mention, a sort of remote echo of the Avar siege, can be found in some versions of the famous Byzantine epic poem *Digenes Akritas*: A (Athens, National Library 1074, dated to the mid-seventeenth century) and T (Trebizond, Soumela Monastery, dated to the late sixteenth/early seventeenth centuries; now lost).¹⁴⁹ A hypothetical archetype of these and another two manuscripts (Paschalis and Oxford), the *Z* version, was reconstructed by E. Trapp in 1971.¹⁵⁰ According to these versions, the attack on Constantinople was supposed to have been undertaken by the Persian king Khusro himself, who was considered as the ruler of the Agarenes. This attack was supposed to include the participation of Ambron, the great-grandfather of *Digenes Akritas*, the great Byzantine frontier warrior, as well as two of Khusro's commanders—Chaganos (the Avar khagan) and Sarbaros (the Persian commander Shahrbaraz)—who were supposed to have taken many prisoners to Syria after the victorious naval battle.¹⁵¹

The theme of the Avar siege of Constantinople appeared in the twelfth century in one of the poems of an anonymous court poet now usually labelled as *Manganeios Prodromos* to distinguish him from the more famous *Theodore Prodromos*.¹⁵² This poem was delivered in an unnamed church that was in the property of *sebastokratorissa* Eirene, the wife of *Andronikos*, the second son of Emperor John II Komnenos. At the time of its composition, Eirene felt out of favour with the Emperor Manuel I

Komnenos.¹⁵³ The poet comforts the *sebastokratorissa*, setting her as an example of the miraculous salvation of the city from the terrible khagan, Chosroes and Sarbaros, that is, undoubtedly King Khusro of Persia and his commander Shahrbaraz who had planned to attack Constantinople.¹⁵⁴ Here Manganeios compares the (Avar) khagan to the Persian king Xerxes and calls him the new Rhapsakes who had intended to swallow the imperial capital like a dragon; but as he stated, the powerful hand of the duchess (Mother of God) sent the large enemy fleet to the bottom of the sea.¹⁵⁵ The central motif of the Avar siege as preserved by the anonymous poet of the twelfth century is probably connected to the growing cult of the Feast of the Akathistos in Byzantine society.

LATIN SOURCES

The first serious attack on Constantinople was rather unknown to the Latin West for a long time. In the seventh century, Latin chronography stagnated and relatively few chronicles have been preserved from this period which provides information about the eastern part of the Roman Empire. Almost all relevant chronicles contain abridged notices about the last Roman–Persian war.¹⁵⁶ Their authors presented it as triumph of Herakleios over the age-old enemy, and particularly mentioned the re-acquisition of the True Cross and its return to Jerusalem. In the West, Herakleios became the new David and Constantine the Great, a model for later mediaeval rulers, and a military ideal in the age of the Crusades.¹⁵⁷ In the West, the legend of Herakleios and the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem completely overshadowed any testimony of the Avar attack on Constantinople which constituted just one, albeit an important episode in the last war of antiquity.¹⁵⁸

Among the Western powers, the papacy was probably the most informed about events in the East. But neither preserved letters nor the *Libri Pontificalis* (Book of Pontiffs) mention neither the Avar attack nor Herakleios's war against the Persians. The Roman popes may have had a reason to laud Herakleios for returning the True Cross, but his religious policy towards the Miaphysites and subsequent military failures against the Arabs probably outweighed his previous triumph in their eyes.

A garbled echo of the Avar attack is only given in one Western source from this period—in the fourth book of the Chronicle of Ps.-Fredegar which covers the period from the creation of the world up to 642. However, it is not known what sources the anonymous chronicler used in

writing about the last war of antiquity. He knew about the Persian incursion to Chalcedon (615) and the attempt to destroy Constantinople, but this is where the verity of his sources ends. The chronicler had no reports about the military activities of the Avars in the siege. However, he did write on Samo's uprising and the battles between the Slavs and the Huns (Avars) in Pannonia. He incorrectly claimed that Herakleios (Aeraclius) was present during the siege of Constantinople along with King Khusro (Cosdroe) of Persia. According to the chronicler, these two monarchs wanted to avoid bloodshed by meeting each other in a personal battle, but the Persian king eventually sent one of his noblemen instead. Herakleios defeated his opponent through trickery, and this triumph forced the Persian king to retreat from the city.¹⁵⁹ It appears that the author of the chronicle confused the Avar siege with Herakleios's decisive battle against the Persians one year later at the ruins of the ancient city of Nineveh where the emperor showed a lot of personal courage.

Another account of the Avar siege appeared in the ninth century when the learned Anastasius Bibliothecarius translated the *Chronographia* of Theophanes into Latin.¹⁶⁰ However, as already mentioned, the Avar attack is there described very briefly and without further detail. An echo of the Avar attack was also preserved in an anonymous report of a Latin pilgrim (Anonymous Tarragonensis, dated to 1075–1098/1099), which mentions an attack on the Byzantine capital by land and sea by two armies and a procession with an unnamed icon around the city walls.¹⁶¹ Its anonymous Latin author studied Greek in Constantinople, and his story of the siege is probably based on reports of the local Greek religious authorities and possibly also on written records preserved in Constantinople.¹⁶²

CHURCH SLAVONIC, GEORGIAN, AND ROMANIAN SOURCES

Some information about the Avar attack is contained in some Byzantine chronicles translated into Church Slavonic, such as the Chronicles of George Monachos Hamartolos, Symeon Magister and Logothetes, and Constantine Manasses.¹⁶³ The Bulgarian, Serbian, and Russian Church Slavonic chronicles did not mention the Avar siege. The only exception are two relatively late Russian Chronographs, which briefly summarize the Persian attack on Jerusalem and Constantinople. These texts show some parallels with the Church Slavonic version of the Chronicle of George Monachos. In addition, it is stated that the attack on Constantinople was carried out by Sarvar (Shahrbaraz) and the Scythian khagan along with the

commanders of the Tauroscythians and countless ferocious warriors in wooden boats. Thanks to the intervention of the Mother of God, they sank into the sea like lead.¹⁶⁴

Another trace of the memory of the Avar siege is preserved in the Church Slavonic notices related to the anniversary of the Avar siege (7 August). That manuscript tradition has unfortunately not yet been thoroughly examined. O. V. Loseva has documented the commemoration of the anniversary of the Avar attack in five Church Slavonic manuscripts.¹⁶⁵ The famous *Diegesis Ophelimos* which contained a memory of that siege was also translated into Church Slavonic.¹⁶⁶ In Muscovite Russia, it was probably translated at the beginning of the fifteenth century in connection with the celebration of the Feast of the Akathistos.¹⁶⁷ G. Lenhoff has demonstrated the existence of this text in thirteenth codices from the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹⁶⁸ There is also a Church Slavonic version of another text for Akathistos—*Lectio Triodii*¹⁶⁹—and that of the Miracles of Archangel Michael ascribed to the Byzantine deacon Pantaleon.¹⁷⁰

Distorted motifs of the Avar siege appear in the reports of Russian pilgrims who visited Constantinople in the fourteenth century. The pilgrim Stephen of Novgorod mentioned in 1349 the attack of the Persians led by king Khusro which was reportedly repelled after an unnamed older man dipped the girdle/belt (*pojas*) of the Mother of God in the sea.¹⁷¹ This story is undoubtedly a contamination of two various historical attacks on Constantinople—that of the Avar siege and the Russian attack from 860. Stephen of Novgorod also connected the stack of human bones exposed in the southern part of the Byzantine capital near the Marmara coast with that siege.¹⁷² A second reflection is reported by another Russian pilgrim, Alexander the Deacon, who visited the Blachernai church in the 1390s and mentioned the siege of Constantinople in the days of the patriarch Sergios.¹⁷³ His notice of dipping the girdle of the Mother of God in the sea again suggest a contamination of the Avar and Russian attacks as it was told at the time in Constantinople.¹⁷⁴

A special motif of the Avar attack contains the “Tale of Temir Aksak” which recalls the miraculous salvation of Moscow from the Turkic-Mongol conqueror Timur (Tamerlane).¹⁷⁵ In its extended version (*Sofijskoe sobranie no. 1389*), some biblical quotations and rhetorical exclamations were almost literally taken from the first part of the Church Slavonic version of the *Diegesis Ophelimos* which deal with the Avar siege.¹⁷⁶ The miraculous rescue of Moscow from the attack of Timur is ascribed to the famous icon

of the Theotokos of Vladimir and its spiritual protection. On that occasion, the author of this story recalled also the earlier siege of Constantinople against “the heretical and godless (Persian) tsar Chosroes”.¹⁷⁷ This motif also contains the third version of the tale, which became a part of the Nikon Chronicle and is dated to the 1520s. The compiler of this text cited this attack as one of the previous signs of supernatural help of the Mother of God provided in times of need.¹⁷⁸ G. Lenhoff shows that the Church Slavonic version of the *Diegesis* was used by the author of the “Tale of Temir Aksak” as a literary model, and the motif of the miraculous salvation of Constantinople in 626 became the prefiguration of the rescue of Moscow from the hordes of Timur.¹⁷⁹

Two sixteenth-century Church Slavonic inscriptions have been preserved in mural paintings in Moldavian churches of the Moldovița and Arbore. The context of both suggests that the depicted scene of the siege of Constantinople is linked to the Avar attack in 626.¹⁸⁰

Curiously enough, the motifs of the Avar attack were known to Ivan the Terrible, as it is evident from his letter to the Polish king Stephen Báthory in 1581. The rhetorical image of the Persian duke Sarvar (Shahrbaraz) and the following comparison with the biblical kings Amalekh and Sennacherib probably refer to the Church Slavonic version of the *Diegesis Ophelimos* and its remote archetype: the homily ascribed to Theodore Synkellos.¹⁸¹

A short account of the Avar siege is contained in the Romanian chronicle of Mihail Moxa from 1620 whose account mainly depended on Manasses’s Chronicle and possibly also on the *Lectio Triodii*.¹⁸² There is also a Romanian translation of *Lectio Triodii* preserved in the Triod from Râmnic.¹⁸³

In Georgian literature, the Avar siege is mentioned in the “Anonymous Narrative about the First Three Sieges of Constantinople” which was connected to the Feast of the Akathistos. Upon the basis of the manuscript tradition, there are eight copies of this text which, according to M. Dzhanashvili, are divided into three groups: extended (three manuscripts), shortened (four manuscripts), and abridged (one manuscript).¹⁸⁴ These versions are translations of the lost Greek originals.

In 1900 and 1912, M. Dzhanashvili published a part of an extended version preserved in the parchment codex of the Georgian Church Museum (no 500) which has been dated to 1042 upon the basis of the preserved colophon.¹⁸⁵ The archetype for the narration of the Avar attack was undoubtedly one of the many versions of the *Diegesis Ophelimos*. A

comparison of both texts reveals several word-for-word matches as well as instances of paraphrasing, including the extensive title identifying this text in several Greek manuscripts.¹⁸⁶ An explanatory note that the Scythians who besieged Constantinople in 626 were Russians is perhaps an addition of the Georgian translator of this text.¹⁸⁷ The Georgian variant of the *Diegesis* in the extended version from 1042 contains many added interpolations. After the report of the Avar attack, there appears an account on the reigns of Emperors Maurikios, Phokas, and Herakleios followed by a narration about the Prophet Mohammed. The textual parallels for these parts can be found in Byzantine chronicles.¹⁸⁸ The final part of the Georgian narration contains information about two Arab sieges of Constantinople which were once again based upon the Greek version of the *Diegesis Ophelimos*. In general, this text represents a Georgian translation of an unpreserved Greek original. M. Van Esbroeck ascribed the authorship to the Byzantine monk and zealous opponent of iconoclasm Theodore Stoudites, but this conclusion was convincingly refuted by K. Akent'ev.¹⁸⁹ Other versions of this text (abridged and shorter ones) presented by M. Dzhnanashvili remain unexamined. However, it is likely that they represented the Georgian version of the *Diegesis Ophelimos* without the additional interpolations which the extended version contains.

ORIENTAL SOURCES

The Avars did not leave behind written testimonies of their history, nor were their exploits echoed in later Hungarian chronicles. However, the Persian participation in the siege of Constantinople is attested to in various Oriental sources. The internal affairs in Persia are reliably covered by Nestorian chronicles which provide valuable testimony on fragmentary episodes from the last war of antiquity. However, there is no information about the Avar attack.

A distorted motif of this attack contains an anonymous history mistakenly attributed to Bishop Sebeos (Ps.-Sebeos, d. after 655 or 661) which only mentions the Persian incursion into Chalcedon in 615 led by Shahen.¹⁹⁰ However, Ps.-Sebeos's information of an attack by sea and the death of 4000 Persians undoubtedly refers to 626 when the Avar khagan tried to move his Persian allies across the Bosphorus with the help of Slavic dugout boats.¹⁹¹

The siege of 626 was also mentioned in various Syriac and Syro-Arabic chronicles which all drew on the hypothetical Syriac Chronicle of

Theophilos of Edessa (d. 725) and its lost Greek original. This material has been preserved by the Arabic Melkite Christian Agapios (in Arabic: Mahbūb ibn-Qūṣṭānṭīn) of Manbij/Hierapolis (d. after 942), the anonymous Syriac author of the *Chronicle AD 1234*, and the Jacobite patriarch Michael the Syrian (1166–1199).¹⁹² Individual versions differ from one another, and they provide only legendary information of this attack. However, according to all of them, it was exclusively a Persian military operation which took a considerably long time (from few months up to one year) and ended with the alliance between the Persian commander Shahrbaraz and Emperor Herakleios. The reasons which allegedly stood behind this rapprochement explain in detail the so-called Shahrbaraz story which will be discussed in more detail in the relevant part of the book.¹⁹³

The presented motifs and their connections to the siege of Constantinople are also present in the Arabic accounts of Ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 871) and al-Tabari (d. 923), who took their information from traditionalists from the first half of the eighth century: al-Zuhri (d. ca. 742) and ‘Ikrima (d. 724).¹⁹⁴

A completely legendary version of the siege of Constantinople was written by the Arab Christian and Orthodox patriarch Eutychios of Alexandria (935–940).¹⁹⁵ According to him, Khusro had been besieging Constantinople for fourteen years, and for six years of this time Emperor Herakleios had been living in the city. The inhabitants of the capital were hungry, and they wanted to open the gates to the Persians. The emperor promised Khusro that he would make some concessions. What follows could be something from a fairy tale. The king of Persia demanded 1000 pounds of gold, 1000 pounds of silver, 1000 young female slaves, 1000 horses, and 1000 brocade robes as a yearly tax. Herakleios, pointing out the occupation of Roman territory, asked for a six-month delay. Khusro agreed, but the emperor then decided to fight his age-old rival.¹⁹⁶ This last piece of information is the only one that corresponds to the facts about the siege of 626.

NOTES

1. For previous lists of the sources, cf. Barišić 1954, 371–377; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1972, 91–92; Tsiaples 2015, 79–97, and particularly Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 171–207 (with extensive commentaries and partial translations of the sources).

2. *Chronicon Paschale*, 716.9–726.10. For further information and a bibliography: Krumbacher 1891, 337–339; Moravcsik 1956, 241–243; Hunger 1978, 328–330; Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, IX–XXIX; Howard-Johnston 2010a, 37–59 (on the report on the Avar siege, cf. 45–48); Neville 2018, 52–55.
3. Barišić 1954, 175.
4. Speck 1980, 62–64, and Howard-Johnston 2010a, 47–48; in contrast, Van Dieten 1985, 153–154. This report was written before 1 September 626 as the dating formula in it clearly reveals (“present indiction 14”). Cf. Speck 1987, 382.
5. J. Howard-Johnston (2010a, 47) suggests that the report was written under the guidance of the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios. This would then explain the omission of his name and activities during the Avar siege. Ericsson (1968, 18) and Van Dieten (1972, 13, n. 28) assume that such omissions should be ascribed to the later Orthodox redactor of the Paschal Chronicle, who deliberately removed the memory of Sergios due to his sympathies and support of Monotheletism. Cf. also Speck 1980, 63, and 1987, 376.
6. Cf. Speck 1980, 31–48; Van Dieten 1985, 157–163; Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 179, n. 457. Howard-Johnston (2010a, 46) admits the possibility that these references come from another source.
7. Mercati 1905/1906, 409.
8. Theodore Synkellos, 298–320. On the problem of its authorship: Vasilevskiy 1896, 90–92; Sternbach 1900, 333 and Szádeczky-Kardoss 1976, 299–300. On the manuscript tradition: Szádeczky-Kardoss 1976, 297–306; 1978a, 87–95; 1982–1984 (1988), 443–450; Kozelnická 2007, 19–28 and 2008, 131–144.
9. *Chronicon Paschale*, 721.4–722.14.
10. Barišić 1954, 373; Szádeczky-Kardoss and Olajos 1990, 148–149. Howard-Johnston (2006, 89) assumes that this text was delivered for the Feast of the Nativity (15 September 626). For a later date (627 or more probably 628), cf. Effenberger 2016, 325.
11. Another variant of this homily is preserved in the codex of the Pantokrator Monastery (Codex Athous Pantokrator gr. 26; ms. dated to the eleventh century). The long eschatological passages were omitted by a later copyist. Cf. Szádeczky-Kardoss and Olajos 1990, 147–182. For the concept of Constantinople as New Jerusalem in this homily cf. Olster 1994, 73–78 and Hurbanič 2016b, 271–293; in generally: Sherrard 1965, 79–136; Zervan 2008, 414–421 and 2010, 86–98; Pahlitzsch 2011, 243–252; on its emergence: Wortley 1983, 361–376; Magdalino 1993, 11–12; Guran 2009, 35–57.

12. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 1–540. For commentaries: Pertusi 1959, 201–224; Speck 1980; Van Dieten 1985, 149–178.
13. On his career and works: Pertusi 1959, 11–16; Hunger 1978, 112–113; Tartaglia 1998, 9–38; Howard-Johnston 2010a, 16–35. Cf. also, Mar. Whitby 1994, 57–87 and 1998, 247–273 and Howard-Johnston 1994, 57–87.
14. Cf. the chapter “From History to Legend”.
15. The primacy of the *Bellum Avaricum* over Synkellos was stressed by Sternbach (1900, 1) and later by Pertusi (1959, 215). On the contrary, Speck (1980, 19) believed that it was George of Pisidia who was influenced by Synkellos and who had his sermon in front of his eyes.
16. Such motifs are as follows: (1) A rhetorical appeal to Emperor Herakleios to come and save endangered Constantinople (*In Bonum Patricium*, v. 50–55, 144 and v. 111–153, 148–152); (2) A triple threat to Constantinople from the Avars, Persians, and the Slavs (*Heraclias* 2, v. 90–97, 214); (3) The same motif of the Avar threat addressed to the young emperor and regent Herakleios Constantine (*In Christi Resurrectionem*, 121–123, 258); and (4) A comparison of the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios to Moses, who had “buried in the sea the second Pharaoh”, resembling the defeat of the enemies in the Golden Horn (*Encomium of Anastasios*, BHG 86, 2, 203.8–9). Cf. Pertusi 1959, 224, and Mar. Whitby 2003, 179. On the other hand, the killing of the Slavs by the Scythians (*In Restitutionem S. Crucis*, v. 78–81, 244) more likely reflects internal strife in the Avar khaganate after 626 than the massacre of the Slavic warriors by the khagan after their unsuccessful naval attack on the final day of the Avar siege, as Tartaglia (1998, 245, n. 19) believes.
17. *Anthologia Graeca*, 120, 121, 178–181. George of Pisidia’s authorship was first recognized by Waltz 1925, 323.
18. George of Pisidia *Poem* 96, 496–498.
19. George of Pisidia *Poem* 95, 496. Cf. Speck 1980, 54–56; Pentcheva 2006, 62; and Effenberger 2016, 290.
20. Vasiliev 1946, 98–99.
21. George of Pisidia *Poem* 102 (On the Church of Pege), 498–501.
22. *Akathistos Hymn*, 29–30. Among others: Wellesz 1953, 152 (in 626 or more probably in 718); Trypanis 1968, 20 (only as a possibility); Van Dieten 1972, 18–19; Av. Cameron 1979a, 6, 22; Meier 2003, 518 (after 626); Peltomaa 2001, 21; 2009, 284–298.
23. Cf. the chapter “The Akathistos”.
24. On his *Historia Syntomos*: Mango 1986a, 539–552 and 1990, 1–31; Howard-Johnston 2010a, 237–267. In this connection, also Moravcsik 1956, 456–459; Hunger 1978, 334–337; Chichurov 1980, 145–150; Speck 1988, 195–211; Treadgold 2013, 26–37 and Neville 2018, 72–75.

25. Nikephoros 13, 58–60.
26. Cf. also Hurbanič 2017, 181–192.
27. On this chronicle: Moravcsik 1956, 531–537; Hunger 1978, 334–339; Chichurov 1980, 5–23; Mango and Scott 1997, I–C; Treadgold 2013, 38–77 and Neville 2018, 61–71. For his sources on the last war of antiquity: Howard-Johnston 2010a, 268–295.
28. Theophanes, 315.7–315.14; 316.16–316.25.
29. Theophanes, 316.25–27 and 323.22–324.16. (= George Kedrenos, 721.18–20 and 733.3–19). For the other version, cf. Nikephoros, 12, 56.49–58.2. The condensed version of this story is preserved by John Zonaras (210.9–16).
30. On the so-called “common source”, cf. Brooks 1906, 578–587; Proudfoot 1974, 367–439; Speck 1988, 516–519; Conrad 1992, 317–401; Mango and Scott 1997, lxxxii–lxxxiii; Hoyland 1997, 400–409 and 631–671 and 2011, 1–35; Palmer 1993, 95–104; and Brandes 2009, 321–322, 326–329. For the most recent discussion: Jankowiak 2013, 247–249 and 260; Debić 2015, 365–382; Conterno 2015, 383–400. The story of Shahrbaraz will be discussed in a subsequent chapter in this book.
31. For various suggested dates regarding the composition of this chronicle, cf. Afinogenov, 1999, 438–447.
32. George Monachos, 670.18–671.5. On his chronicle: Moravcsik 1956, 277–280; Hunger 1978, 347–351; Treadgold 2013, 114–120 and Neville 2018, 87–92.
33. Wahlgren 2006, 7. This chronicle came to us under several names listed by Wahlgren (2001, 252). None of them could any longer be considered as the specific redactor of this text. Cf. Wahlgren 2001, 251–262, and Kresten 1976, 203–212. For other comments of this chronicle: Moravcsik 1956, 515–517; Hunger 1978, 354–357; Treadgold 2013, 203–217 and Neville 2018, 118–123.
34. For the date and composition of this chronicle: Moravcsik 1956, 233; Hunger 1978, 393–394 and esp. Külzer 1991, 413–447. Cf. also Neville 2018, 135–136.
35. *Chronicon Bruxellense*, 29.
36. Moravcsik 1956, 273–275; Hunger 1978, 393–394; Treadgold 2013, 339–342 and Neville 2018, 162–168.
37. George Kedrenos, 727.11–727.17 and 728.14–23.
38. George Kedrenos, 728.23–729.18. On the topography of Palatia Petra, cf. Janin 1964, 463 and Külzer 2008, 580–581.
39. Moravcsik 1956, 344–348, and Hunger 1978, 416–419; Treadgold 2013, 388–399; Neville 2018, 191–199.
40. John Zonaras, 208.17–209.7.

41. Constantine Manasses, v. 3682–3736, 200–203. On the author and his work: Lampsidis 1996, XI–CLIX. For further information: Moravcsik 1956, 353–356; Hunger 1978, 419–422; Treadgold 2013, 399–403 and Neville 2018, 200–204.
42. Cf. the critical apparatus by Lampsidis (200–203). Like George of Pisidia, Manasses compared the Avars to the mythical Scylla by using the same rhetorical expression *Σκοθοτρόφος* (“the one who nourish the Scythians”). Cf. Constantine Manasses, v. 3698–3699, 201 and George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 204–206, 168. However, in his other poem (*Heraclias* 2, v. 73, 214) George applied the same expression to Charybdis and not Scylla. The motif of Scylla and Charybdis is also present in Theodore Synkellos (304.18–19). Cf. also *Heraclias* 2, v. 73–82, and v. 90–97, 214 and subsequent comments by Pertusi 1959, 273; Speck 1980, 77–78, n. 59; Frendo 1984, 183–184; Van Dieten 1985, 154–155 and Mar. Whitby 1994, 209–210.
43. Constantine Manasses, v. 3690, 3696, 201 (Avars); v. 3689, 3696, 201, v. 3714, 202 (Scythians), and v. 3707, 3715, 202 (Tauroscythians).
44. For the most recent discussion: Tocci (2006, 127–144 and 2015, 64–115) who maintained that the Synopsis Chronike and Chronika were written by Theodore Skoutariotes. His authorship of the Synopsis Chronike is, however, questioned by Zafeiris 2011, 253–264 (esp. 262–263). Cf. also Neville 2018, 232–236.
45. *Synopsis Chronike*, 108.16–109.9; Theodore Skoutariotes, 2.199, 122.1–12.
46. *Synopsis Chronike*, 108.19; Theodore Skoutariotes, 2199, 122.8.
47. *Synopsis Chronike*, 109.6–8; Theodore Skoutariotes, 2.199, 122.10–12.
48. Cf. Constantine Laskaris, 67; *The Chronicle of 1570* (Ps.-Dorotheos of Monembasia), 276–277.
49. Doukas 36.4, 317. On this source: Moravcsik 1956, 247–251; Hunger 1978, 490–494 and Neville 2018, 298–301.
50. On the origins of the Byzantine liturgical calendars: Ehrhard 1937, 25–35 and Høgel 2002, 34–45.
51. Ehrhard 1937, 19; Høgel 2002, 36.
52. Cf. *Kalendarium*, 65. For the date of this manuscript, cf. Orsini 2018, 162. Cf. also *Jaharis Gospel Lectionary*, 113. For the other manuscripts of Byzantine lectionaries preserving the notice of this commemoration, cf. Lowden 2009, 32–33.
53. For the term “Synaxarion”, cf. Taft and Ševčenko 1991, 1991; Noret 1968, 20–24. Cf. also Ehrhard 1937, 28–33; Høgel 2002, 35.
54. Delehaye 1902.
55. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (BHG 1063b), col. 872–876.

56. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Lipsiensis R II 25), col. 871–874 (originally from the monastery of St. Giorgio di Tucco in Calabria from 1172). Cf. Pieralli 1994, 463–468.
57. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Parisinus Graecus 1587), col. 869–872.
58. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Lipsiensis R II 25), col. 873–874.44–50.
59. *Historia Syntomos*, 38–39. On the manuscript tradition, cf. Šišková 2009, 15–19.
60. Ehrhard 1937, 683.
61. Hunger 1961, 50.
62. Ehrhard 1943, 746, n. 2.
63. Halkin 1984, 296.
64. *Historia Syntomos* 39.14–62 and *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Lipsiensis R II 25), col. 873–874.54–56.
65. Cf. Ševčenko 1991, 1340.
66. Moravcsik 1956, 294; Der Nersessian, 1940–41, 104–125; Ševčenko 1962, 245–276.
67. *Miraculum Mariae*, col. 573D–575A.
68. *Miraculum Mariae*, col. 576B.
69. For the terminology: Luzzi 2014, 148.
70. On these stationary processions in Constantinople, cf. esp. Baldovin 1987.
71. Mateos 1962, X–XVIII; Luzzi 2014, 201.
72. *Patmos* 266, 101.
73. *Patmos* 266, 101, n. 4.
74. Baldovin 1987, 191.
75. Mateos 1962, XVIII–XIX; Grumel (1967, 45–57) dated this version to after 970 and before the beginning of the eleventh century. For a general overview, cf. Kazhdan 1991, 2132–2133.
76. *Hagios Stauros* 40: 1, 362.14–364.13.
77. *Patmos* 266, 124.
78. *Hagios Stauros* 40: 2, 52.20–54.24.
79. For this feast, cf. the chapter “The Akathistos”.
80. Some manuscripts have a modification to the title. On this text, most recently: Kösegi 2015 (for the manuscript tradition 20–34).
81. Theophanes, 353.25–354.17.
82. *Diegesis Opbelimos*, col. 1365B.
83. Nikephoros, 52, 120.11; Theophanes, 395.24–25. Cf. Barišić (1955, 170) who, however, only referred to chronicle of Theophanes.
84. Cf. also Barišić 1955, 170; Moravcsik 1956, 294–295; Brzóstkowska and Swoboda 1995, 8.

85. Théarvic 1904, 299 and 1905, 165–166.
86. Among others, cf. Speck 1986, 227; Spadaro 1991, 259.
87. Kösegi 2015, 21–31.
88. Høgel 2002, 63. On Symeon Metaphrastes and his work, Høgel 2002, 61–158 and most recently 2014, 181–196.
89. A. Ehrhard (1938, 611) asserted that the original part of the Diegesis was a prologue (BHG 1059z) which Symeon Metaphrastes removed when compiling his Menologion. The mentioned prologue, beginning with the words *ἐμῶν ῥημάτων ἄκουσον*, has only been preserved in one manuscript from the fourteenth century (Oxon. Bodl. Selden 8 arch supra 9, ed. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1978b, 49–51). However, Szádeczky-Kardoss (1989, 195–196, and 1990, 36) and T. Antonopoulou (2010, 78) pointed out that this sort of metric prologue started to appear in manuscripts only from the twelfth century and therefore could not have been an original part of the Diegesis. Ehrhard also provided evidence to support the existence of the Diegesis prior to Metaphrastes's Menologion upon the basis of the manuscript tradition. According to him, the Diegesis was present in liturgical collections in the movable church year; however, of the six manuscripts he mentions, only two are dated to earlier than the thirteenth century. The occurrence of the Diegesis in these sorts of collections is therefore very scattered and does not provide much proof of its wide usage before the emergence of the Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes. Cf. Kösegi 2015, 32–33.
90. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1356D. Cf. Pentcheva 2002, 22–27.
91. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, 1361B.
92. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1348–1354. This text is only traditionally ascribed to Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos. Cf. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1903, 9, 19–20. The author of the *Lectio* mentioned the city of Chrysopolis (col. 1349A) on the Asian side of the Bosphorus and added that it is now known under the name of Skoutari. Such a designation for this agglomeration was, however, not used before the twelfth century. Cf. Janin 1964, 494 and Speck 1980, 137.
93. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1349AB.
94. Cf. Nikephoros, 11, 54.1–3; Theophanes, 302.34–303.3. Speck 1980, 137, n. 320.
95. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1349B.
96. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352C.
97. Grumel 1958, 185.
98. Grumel 1958, 183–185. For the other three manuscripts of this homily, cf. Kotzabassi 1998, 58–62 (61), 100–103 (102) and 146–150 (152) and Shailor 1987, 3–7 (5). On the manuscript tradition, cf. Beláková 2012, 20.

99. Grumel 1958, 185, 189–190.
100. Grumel 1958, 187–189, cf. also Beck 1959, 475.
101. Speck 1986, 209–227.
102. Speck 1986, 209–211. His conclusions were accepted by Kazhdan (1999, 58) and Darrouzès (1987, 7).
103. Reinsch 2000, 45.
104. Reinsch 2000, 44–46 (cf. subsequent reaction by Speck 2002, 302).
105. Ps.-Germanos, 16, 195.
106. Ps.-Germanos, 16, 195. On this motif, cf. Grumel 1964, 217; Stratos 1968, 373–374 and Speck 1986, 209–210.
107. Cf. the chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
108. Ps.-Germanos, 17, 195; cf. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1364B (a very similar closing section referring to the Avar siege); cf. also Speck 1986, 221. For an opposite view, cf. Grumel, 1958, 188.
109. Ps.-Germanos, 17, 195.
110. Ps.-Germanos, 16, 195.
111. Hunger, Kresten and Hannick 1984, 126–132, 131 (ff. 263–279v).
112. Antonios Tripsychos, 337–341.
113. Sternbach 1900, 336 (cf. his edition on 337–342).
114. Antonios Tripsychos, 75–87.
115. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1903, 72–74.
116. Leroy and Delouis 2004, 24–25.
117. Antonios Tripsychos, 4, 81.5–13.
118. Antonios Tripsychos, 4, 81.26–82.15.
119. Antonios Tripsychos, 5, 82.19–20.
120. Antonios Tripsychos, 6, 83.1–2.
121. Antonios Tripsychos, 6, 83–84.
122. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1903, 73–74.
123. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1903, 74.
124. Mango 1978b, 118; Karapli 2009, 331.
125. Tsiaples 2015, 90.
126. *Miracula Michaelis Archangeli*, 90.
127. *Miracula Michaelis Archangeli*, 90.
128. *Miracula Michaelis Archangeli*, 90.
129. Damaskenos Stoudites, 266; *Megas Synaxaristes*, 187–188.
130. Dionysios of Fournà, 174.
131. Tsiaples, 2015, 91.
132. Theodore Laskaris, 272–283. Cf. Giannouli 2001, 259–272.
133. Theodore Laskaris, 273.10–11.
134. Theodore Laskaris, 273.30–33; cf. also 274.52–53.
135. Vasiliev 1946, 103–105.
136. Pseutogkas 2002, 127–145.

137. Antonios of Larissa, 128–137.
138. Pseutogkas 2002, 11–23.
139. *Diegesis* (1402), 102–117.
140. Gautier 1965, 101.
141. Hunger 1958, 280–281
142. Gautier 1965, 100–101.
143. *Diegesis* (1402), 110.5.
144. *Diegesis* (1402), 112.32–114.6.
145. Nicholas Mystikos, 10, 70.
146. Nicholas Mystikos, 10, 70.20–45.
147. Nicholas Mystikos, 10, 70.30–39.
148. Nicholas Mystikos, 10, 70.39–45; *Diegesis Ophelimos* col. 1364C.
149. On these manuscripts, Jeffreys 1998, XXI–XXII.
150. Trapp 1971.
151. *Digenes Akrites* (A), v. 4291–4312, 435–436; (T) 9, v. 3055–3076, 250–252; (Z) 9 v. 4153–4174, 347–349.
152. Manganeios Prodrornos, 20–24.
153. Eirene was imprisoned two times: in 1143 (soon after accession of Emperor Manuel I. Komnenos) and in 1147. Cf. E. Jeffreys and M. Jeffreys 1994, 41–42 and 58. On her as a person, cf. Lampsidis 1984, 91–105; Jeffreys 2013, 177–194.
154. Manganeios Prodrornos, vv. 54–61, 22.
155. Manganeios Prodrornos, vv. 69–74, 22–23.
156. An overview of contemporary and late Latin sources on the reign of Emperor Herakleios and his Persian campaigns is given by Sommerlechner 2003, 319–360.
157. For the reception of this legend in the West, cf. Baert 2004, 140–193; 198–199, 219–221, 237–242, 254, 280–289, 369–379, 430–446; Borgehammar 2009, 145–201; Curschmann 1995, 49–61.
158. Brandes 2002, 36.
159. Ps.-Fredegar, 4.64, 228, 230. Baudot (1928, 161–162) and Rotter (1986, 150–151) rightly conclude that this story (and the other episodes of the Persian war as well) were actually based on the report of the two Frankish envoys Servatus and Paternus after their return to King Dagobert from the embassy in Constantinople (Ps.-Fredegar, 4.62, 226, 228).
160. Anastasius Bibliothecarius, 195.27–31; 196.23–34; 201.34–202.18.
161. *Anonymus Tarragonensis* 128.392–400. On the date of this report and its author: Ciggaar (1995, 128–134).
162. *Anonymus Tarragonensis* 120.52 and 125.265–266. Cf. Ciggaar 1995, 33, and 1996, 82.
163. Georgij Mnich, 434; Simeon Metafrast i Logofet, 66; Konstantin Manasi, 133–134.

164. *The Chronograph of 1512*, 304 and *The Chronograph of the West-Russian Recension*, 119. Cf. also. *Litsevoy Letopisniy Svod*, 308–312 (with its miniatures of the siege).
165. Loseva 2001, 122–126, 401. However, in the famous Ostromir Gospels there is obviously a scribal error. Instead of the memory of the attack of the barbarians in Blachernai, there is a mention of the other unattested Feast of Saint Barbara. Cf. Ulyanov 2008, 140.
166. On its textual tradition among the Balkan Slavs, cf. Ivanova 2008, 496–497, on individual manuscripts, cf. also 56–57, 88–91, 101–102.
167. Published by Yakovlev 1868, 11–33; Lenhof 2004, 51–55 and 2015, 280. On its manuscript tradition, cf. Kisterev 2012, 182–207 and 357–362.
168. Cf. Lenhoff 2015, 284–286. The Slavonic version of the Diegesis is preserved as at least forty-five various manuscripts (Lenhoff 2015, 284).
169. *Triod postnaya*, тл–тла (330–331).
170. *Velikiya Minei-Chetii*, nojabr, dni 1–12, 271–272.
171. Stephen of Novgorod, 39; for the datation, cf. Majeska 1984, 17.
172. Stephen of Novgorod, 39.
173. Alexander the Clerk, 163; for the datation, cf. Majeska 1984, 156.
174. For this motif of the Russian attack in 860, cf. Symeon Magister and Logothetes (131.29, 245–247). In this regard, cf. Majeska 1984, 335, and Mango 1958, 76–88.
175. On various versions of this story cf. Klos 2001, 61–141. Also, Zhuchkova 1984, 97–109; Grebenyuk 1971, 185–206; Lenhoff 2004, 279–299; Lenhoff 2015, 39–64, and recently Lyapin 2016, 218–232.
176. *Povest' o Temir-Aksake* (S), 109–110, 113. On these parallels, Lenhoff 2015, 289–290.
177. *Povest' o Temir-Aksake* (S), 110. Cf. Lenhoff 2004, 43.
178. *Povest' o Temir-Aksake* (N), 130; Lenhoff 2004, 47.
179. Lenhoff 2004, 43 and 2015, 280.
180. Grecu 1924, 288; Ciobanu 2005, 59–60, 92–93 and Grabar 1947, 93 (and comments: 89–101).
181. Ivan the Terrible (1581), 237. Cf. Erchak 2009, 169 and 504.
182. Mihail Moxa, 159–160. Cf. Ciobanu 2005, 44–45.
183. Text is published by Ciobanu 2005, 39–41.
184. Dzhanashvili 1900, 107; Akent'ev (2010, 130) dates this text to between 818 and 860 (more probably between 843 and 860); cf recently Schilling 2015, 272–300.
185. *Osada Konstantinopolya*, 8–61 (original and Russian translation). In 1976 Van Esbroeck (1976, 79–96) published a study including a French translation of part of the narration upon the basis of the text which was published by Dzhanashvili in 1900. However, this Belgian scholar over-

- looked the fact that Dzhanashvili had edited an incomplete text of this narration. Dzhanashvili published the full text only in 1912 (114–144), but only in Russian translation. Given that Van Esbroeck had no information about this publication, he filled in the missing part of the narration using the Cagevi manuscript from the sixteenth century (Van Esbroeck 1993, 531–536).
186. Dzhanashvili 1900, 9; Van Esbroeck 1976, 79, Akent'ev 2010, 159.
 187. Akent'ev 2010, 128. 130 and 186 No. 309.
 188. Cf. especially Akent'ev 2010, 186–191.
 189. Van Esbroeck 1993, 525–536; Akent'ev 2010, 128–129.
 190. Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 79.
 191. Howard-Johnston 1999, 12; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 211.
 192. Agapios, 458; *Chronicon AD 1234*, 98, 181–182; Michael the Syrian, 11.3, 408–409; Bar Hebraeus, 89. The core of the authenticity of this report was stressed by Van Dieten 1972, 21, and especially Mango 1985b, 107–109; Kaegi 2003, 149–153; Pourshariati 2008, 141–149. For a more sceptical view: Speck 1988, 144–152 and 292–297; Frendo 2000, 27–45; Howard-Johnston 2006, 12–14 and 2010a, 368–369. Cf. also a recent discussion by Conterno 2014, 6–7.
 193. Cf. the chapter “Winners and Losers”.
 194. Al-Tabari, 319; al-Zuhri, 108–110. Commentary by Frendo 2000, 31–32; Howard-Johnston 2006, 12–14; Pourshariati 2008, 141–149; and esp. Kaegi and Cobb 2008, 101–107.
 195. Eutychios, 102–104.
 196. Eutychios, 104.

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The Interpretation of the Siege

The first pioneers of mediaeval and Byzantine historical research initially paid marginal attention to the Avar siege of Constantinople, mentioning it solely in various general surveys dealing with the history of Byzantium.¹ It was only at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that the first papers on this topic appeared; however, these were mostly popular ones, and with just one exception they were not written by professional historians.

The first such paper was written by A. D. Mordtmann, Jr, a physician at the German hospital in Istanbul and one of the first scholars dealing with the Byzantine sigillography.² Mordtmann briefly discusses the siege and its aftermath, and he provided additional information about some topographical features associated with this attack.³ At the beginning of the First World War, a hitherto unknown Russian author, E. E. Tevyashov, published his paper in a relatively well-known Tsarist Russian periodical. He considered the siege as the beginning of the tradition of the Slavic, that is, Russian, attacks on the Byzantine capital. Therefore, according to him, it had its proper place in Russian history.⁴ However, Tevyashov rather surprisingly concluded that the siege of Constantinople in 626 “does not represent an important event in Byzantine history”.⁵

During the First World War, a summarizing overview was published by G. Schlumberger, another physician and pioneer scholar on Byzantine sigillography.⁶ The last of such contributions appeared in 1948 and was

written by F. Dirimtekin, a former director of the Hagia Sophia Museum in Istanbul. Dirimtekin briefly outlined the growing power of the “Avar-Turks”, as he named the attackers, and then described the different phases of the siege of Constantinople. Unlike the other authors, Dirimtekin incorrectly stated that this attack was led by the Avar commander Apsich, whom he believed, wrongly again, to be the true successor to Khagan Bayan, whose death he placed in 601.⁷

Before the mid-twentieth century, a more complex perspective on the history of the Avar siege was primarily outlined by two authors. The first one was the Italian researcher A. Pernice in his book on the reign of Emperor Herakleios.⁸ He was the first scholar who drew attention to the defence of Constantinople and its fortifications during the siege. Taking this into account, he subsequently tried to explain the course of the attack and its aftermath. On the other hand, few inaccuracies and chronological uncertainties occurred in his survey. The latter resulted from the fact that Pernice incorrectly evaluated some references in the sources preserved by the Constantinopolitan patriarch Nikephoros and in the Paschal Chronicle. He failed to recognize that they referred in fact to the final attack at the end of the siege.⁹ The second author who critically outlined the Avar siege and its consequences in detail was the Russian scholar J. Kulakovskiy in his history of Byzantium.¹⁰ Similarly to Pernice,¹¹ he believed that the area of Blachernai had been already protected by a new wall. They both based their conclusions upon the testimony of George of Pisidia.¹²

Yet more comprehensive view of the siege appeared in the contribution written by the Yugoslavian Byzantinist F. Barišić.¹³ This author emphasized its importance and consequences, which, he maintained, led to the rapid collapse of the Avar Khaganate and the stabilization of the Slavic settlements in Southeastern Europe. He particularly referred to the motives of this attack and causes of the Avar defeat. Barišić also rightly criticized a certain inconsistency among previous, but unnamed, authors with respect to some unsolved questions concerning the siege. On the other hand, he almost entirely attributed such inconsistencies to the previous uncritical approach to preserved sources.¹⁴ For this reason, he was the first scholar who clearly described and assessed all the relevant sources, and by comparing them he thoroughly described the siege day by day. Unfortunately, by this reconstruction he did not consider the topography of the fortifications of Constantinople or the military and strategic objectives of the Avar khagan during the siege. The most discussed parts of his paper are his two final statements. The first one concerns the military and

diplomatic involvement of the Persians in the siege. Barišić, just as Pernice before him, rejected a pre-planned scheme for this attack.¹⁵ Further, he considered the penetration of the Persian army to the Bosphorus as a mere diversion, because in his view Shahrbaraz and his soldiers could not have threatened Constantinople without the necessary naval forces.¹⁶ Barišić's second disputed thesis is his evaluation of the causes of the Avar defeat, which he mainly attributed to shrinking supplies. Their lack allegedly forced the khagan to carry out the attack prematurely.¹⁷ In generally, Barišić's study became a solid foundation for all subsequent authors dealing with this topic.

The siege of Constantinople in 626 was then analysed by the Greek Byzantinist A. Stratos.¹⁸ Unlike Barišić, he considered the attack as agreed in advance with the Persians.¹⁹ By stressing its importance, he maintained that such a joint expedition should have led to the destruction of Byzantium. He associated the reasons for this Avar attack with the activities of imperial diplomacy in Central Europe that contributed to the revolt of the Slavic tribes led by the Frankish merchant Samo. In his view, these very riots presented a great danger to the Khaganate and subsequently encouraged the Avars to attack Constantinople.²⁰ Stratos was the first one to draw attention to the information regarding the arrival of imperial reinforcements led by Theodore, the brother of Emperor Herakleios, and he assumed that this military threat forced the khagan to accelerate preparations for the final assault on Constantinople.²¹ The only problem is that Stratos put too much emphasis on the marginal note about the alleged transfer of this imperial army across the Bosphorus preserved in the *Paschal Chronicle*. Stratos combined this note with the later report of Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos and interpreted it in the sense that the Byzantine army had begun an extensive reconquest of the Balkans.²² This proposition has been challenged by various authors, particularly R. J. Lilie.²³

In the first half of the 1970s, a detailed but essentially summarizing description of the Avar siege appeared in a monograph written by the German historian L. Waldmüller, who mainly dealt with the history of the Christianization of Southeastern Europe in the early Middle Ages.²⁴ One would expect that the siege would be analysed in detail in syntheses dedicated to the history and archaeology of the Avars. However, the opposite is true; it is almost completely absent in the collective German–Japanese work by A. Kollautz and H. Miyakawa and it is not given much space in similar surveys, such as those written by the Slovak historian A. Avenarius and the Yugoslav archaeologist J. Kovačević and the Polish archaeologist

W. Szymański.²⁵ A detailed account of the Avar siege is, however, presented by the Austrian historian W. Pohl who considered it to be the most ambitious venture of the members of the Bayanid Dynasty.²⁶ Pohl, just like other authors, was convinced that the Persians and Avars had coordinated their activities in advance, although he did not deal with the diplomatic background of the attack specifically.²⁷ Unlike the majority of the scholars, he critically evaluated the later report written by the patriarch Nikephoros, which is largely seen as a complementary addition to contemporary sources and a backbone for the reconstruction of the final day of the attack.²⁸ He saw the causes of the Avars' failure mainly in the lack of necessary siege equipment, the poor military coordination of the Avaro-Slavic troops, the shrinking supplies of the besiegers, and the threat of imperial reinforcements to the Avars.²⁹ The Greek Byzantinist G. Kardaras has recently given comprehensive attention to the Avar attack in his monographs outlining the relations between Byzantium and the Avars.³⁰

At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, two short papers from the Czech Byzantinist L. Havlíková and the Ukrainian historian J. E. Borovskiy appeared. Havlíková focused on the broader foreign policy within the context of the siege, which she did not consider to be an isolated phenomenon but rather the result of a Byzantine–Persian alliance. Likewise, she dealt with the origin of the Slavs in the Avar army where she makes a distinction between those coming from the central areas of the Khaganate and those that could be considered as independent Slavs of the Lower Danube.³¹

The same question was also discussed by Borovskiy who concluded that the Slavs brought to Constantinople by the khagan were of an Eastern Slavic, in his view Russian, origin.³² In support of his thesis, however, Borovskiy presented very inconclusive evidence, including problematic references preserved in later Byzantine, Georgian, and Church Slavonic chronicles, and other texts dealing with the liturgical tradition of the Avar siege. Even his other arguments—for example, the references to burial rites or to the allegedly similar typology of the Slavic dug-out boats—cannot be considered as clear evidence of the presence of Eastern Slavs in this event.

The most recent well-known separate study on this topic comes from the English historian J. Howard-Johnston.³³ Although he considers this attack to have been a coordinated Avar–Persian undertaking, he maintains that the Persians had no interest in this siege, as they made no attempt to

mobilize their naval forces from occupied Roman Oriens.³⁴ Howard-Johnston primarily focuses on the coordination of the attack between the Avars and the Persians, as well as on the siege preparations. He emphasized that the city was well-prepared for the attack; he concentrated on the circumstances of the preparation of the attack more than the siege itself.

At the beginning of the new millennium, the Hungarian Byzantinist S. Szádeczky-Kardoss summarized the discussed issue of the Avar–Persian alliance, which, according to him, was the result of agreements reached in advance.³⁵ In 2003, the distinguished American historian and Byzantinist W. Kaegi dealt with the siege in his monograph dedicated to the reign of Emperor Herakleios.³⁶ Initially, Kaegi focused on relations between the Eastern Roman Empire, Persia, and the Arabs. He paid rather marginal attention to the Avar attack, not even devoting a full chapter to it. In this case, it is a short summary of events that is more based on sources rather than the previous conclusions of historiography. Furthermore, recent works on the Avar siege should be mentioned³⁷ and, finally, also the contributions of the author of this book.³⁸

THE MILITARY ASPECTS OF THE SIEGE

Several contributions on this topic primarily dealt with the broader issue of Constantinople's fortifications. During the Avar siege, the greatest fighting initially took place in the central section of the Theodosian Walls and later culminated in the Blachernai sector. The identification of individual gates in the central section of the Theodosian Walls, mentioned during the Avar siege, remains still a point of discussion.³⁹ Also, the debate over the original line of the Theodosian Walls is particularly important. At the turn of the twentieth century, two often discussed views appeared concerning their possible direction from the Tekfur Saray Palace. Usually it is considered that the walls ran northwest from there and followed a line marked by the traces of the older fortifications and substructures to today's Ayvansaray plain by the Golden Horn.⁴⁰ However, critics have questioned this and assumed there was a north-easterly direction along the sixth city hill to the area of the Church of Saint Demetrios Kanabes.⁴¹ The most contentious issue is that of the Blachernai sector.⁴² The majority of the authors accepted that at least a part of this quarter was protected by the simple wall during the Avar attack, but their opinions differ regarding the time of its construction and original line.⁴³

The most recent important work on this issue comes from the distinguished Turkish–German archaeologist N. Asutay-Effenberger.⁴⁴ Upon the basis of existing knowledge, archaeological research, and primary sources, she concluded that the Theodosian land walls did not extend in a north-westerly direction but rather in a north-easterly one, finishing by the Church of Demetrios Kanabes. The hitherto visible remnants of various portions of the older remnants of walls of Blachernai cannot be reliably dated to the fifth century as previous authors had assumed.⁴⁵ For this reason, the so-called double-walkway wall could not be identified with the Pteron mentioned during the Avar siege. Finally, Asutay-Effenberger concluded that the whole Blachernai quarter had remained unprotected during the Avar siege and it was only fortified by the so-called Wall of Herakleios.⁴⁶

The critical examination of this problem will be discussed extensively in the relevant part of this book, including the closely related matter regarding the sea wall along the Golden Horn.⁴⁷ It was at first the French scholar V. Grumel who discussed its existence during the Avar siege. He concluded that Constantinople was then only partly protected along the Golden Horn arguing that there was no sea wall between the walls of Constantine and the quarter of Blachernai.⁴⁸ Grumel based his arguments on his edition of the homily attributed to the patriarch Germanos and some other sources. Grumel's conclusions were later questioned by A. Stratos who surmised that the walls stretched along the whole area of that bay (including that of Blachernai) but were in a significantly damaged state.⁴⁹ However, this makes Stratos's assertion that the Avar khagan could not expect a favourable result from this side of the city a rather contradictory one.⁵⁰ Upon the basis of this, Stratos also mistakenly assumed that the khagan's attack at Blachernai was just a diversion intended to enable the transportation of the Persian forces from the Asian side of the Bosphorus.⁵¹

The most detailed analysis on overall military aspects of the Avar attack was written by B. Tsangadas.⁵² In addition to chapters dealing with various stages of Constantinople's fortifications, he discussed various sieges of the city up to the ninth century. He held a traditional view regarding the topography of Blachernai, considering it to be the city's fourteenth region whose own fortifications were later incorporated into the new Theodosian Walls. Tsangadas based his conclusion entirely on previous investigations conducted by the English professor in Istanbul A. Van Millingen and the German archaeologist A. M. Schneider. The latter concluded that the area around the Blachernai church was not entirely closed off and it was only

protected by the double-sided-walkway defensive wall.⁵³ Schneider, and similarly Tsangadas, maintained that the whole sector from the sea was only enclosed by a new wall, which was built by Herakleios after the end of the siege in 627.⁵⁴ Tsangadas correctly stated that if such a sea wall had already stood during the Avar siege, there would have been no reason for the Slavic dug-out canoes to have attacked from this side.⁵⁵ On the other hand, he makes the surprising assertion that the decisive land and sea attack at Blachernai in the final stages of the siege was just a diversion which was supposed to allow for a breakthrough in the central part of the Theodosian Walls.⁵⁶ Tsangadas also wrongly identified the “brachialia” (the short walls projected into the sea) mentioned in the Paschal Chronicle as two heavily fortified enclosures in the central section of the Theodosian Walls, namely, the Polyandrion Gate and the Pempton Gate.⁵⁷

Tsangadas assumed that before the final Avar attack on Blachernai, the commander of Constantinople, magister Bonos, had pulled his flotilla out of sight of the Avars and placed it on both banks of the Golden Horn. In accordance with the report preserved by the patriarch Nikephoros, he also states that thanks to a false signal from Bonos, the khagan attacked at a time which was convenient for the defenders. However, he is not specific in terms of what advantage the defenders had gained at that moment.⁵⁸ In abandoning the defensive positions of the ships mentioned in the Paschal Chronicle, the city would have risked serious incursion of the Slavs and other Avar allies from the Golden Horn. In his concluding observations, Tsangadas stressed the hitherto neglected factor of the state and effectiveness of the city’s fortifications. In addition to this, he attributed the failure of the Avars to other factors, including their inadequate siege technology and the khagan’s despotic leadership of the attack.⁵⁹

In addition, the discussion of the military aspects of the Avar attack focused on the composition of the khagan’s forces⁶⁰ and primarily the question of the origin of specific non-Avar ethnicities, particularly the Slavs. Historians from Central and Eastern Europe have waged ongoing disputes over the origin and political status of the khagan’s Slavs.⁶¹ Other historians examined the siege machines used by the Avars and their allies during their siege of Constantinople,⁶² especially the origin of the traction catapults. The most important studies on this have been written by G. Dennis, P. E. Chevedden, G. Kardaras, and L. I. Petersen.⁶³ The latter even outlined the Avar attack in a special chronological list of sieges from 408 to 813.⁶⁴

Some historians have paid considerable attention to the type of dug-out canoes labelled as monoxyles by Greek authors and used by the Slavs during the Avar siege.⁶⁵ In this aspect, there is an interesting yet almost neglected study by R. Hošek, a Czech expert on antiquity, who interpreted in detail some verses of George of Pisidia (*Bellum Avaricum*) and reached the conclusion that during the decisive attack, the Slavic dug-out canoes were tied together by means of ropes pulled through side openings which could be visible on remnants of such boats in various parts of Europe.⁶⁶ The same conclusions regarding the tactic of the Slavs were reached independently by an American historian of Greek origin, S. Vryonis Jr.⁶⁷

In addition to the fortifications, the discussion of the defence of the city focused on the structure and number of Constantinople's defenders as well as the problem of reinforcements sent to Constantinople by Emperor Herakleios.⁶⁸ Some aspects of the city's topography in the Golden Horn sector have been elaborated on by the author of this publication.⁶⁹

THE TRADITION OF THE AVAR SIEGE

The last area of general research focusing on the Avar siege is related to its tradition⁷⁰ and commemoration in Byzantine liturgy.⁷¹ There is a close connection here with the "second prologue" of the Akathistos, which some authors attribute to the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios and put in the context of the Avar siege.⁷² This theory relies mostly on the later (and still living) liturgical tradition of the Orthodox Church. On the other hand, supporters of this theory, despite their efforts in searching for proof in contemporary sources, have been unable to harmonize their claims with the development of the memory of the Avar attack, which was first commemorated as simply an anniversary day and only later within the Feast of the Akathistos.⁷³ This special liturgical celebration united the memory of the Avar siege alongside two Arab sieges and thus highlighted the protective role of the Theotokos, which spread to other countries in the Orthodox world. In the late Byzantine and post-Byzantine periods, the tradition of the Avar siege was visualized by means of mural paintings and icons preserved in today's Macedonia, Romania, and Russia.⁷⁴ The last significant aspect of this tradition is that of sacred objects used during the Avar siege. A. Pertusi, L. Van Dieten, and other authors focused on the religious objects that were carried by the patriarch Sergios in the liturgical processions during the siege.⁷⁵ This sacred arsenal was later explored by B. Pentcheva, P. Speck, and others.⁷⁶ The conclusions of B. Pentcheva are

particularly important. Based on the analysis of primary and later sources, she challenged the use of icons as sacred symbols during the Avar siege.⁷⁷ In 2006, she returned to the question in a separate monograph in which she once again pointed out that the icons were only fully employed in liturgical processions in the Byzantine Empire starting from the eleventh century.⁷⁸

APPENDIX

Finally, an additional group of important material on the Avar siege should be briefly examined. This one includes various historical commentaries on individual motifs preserved in primary and later sources. Such material is usually present in various general anthologies to the history of the early Slavs and Avars in the form of short but valuable notices.⁷⁹ The following overview will cover only the more detailed ones which are related to the primary sources to the Avar siege.

Bellum Avaricum

The first detailed commentary on this historical poem of George of Pisidia appeared already by J. M. Quercius.⁸⁰ Another one was produced in 1959 by the Italian classical philologist and Byzantinist A. Pertusi in his critical edition of the historical poems of George of Pisidia.⁸¹ In his extensive comments, Pertusi briefly outlined the background of the Avar siege by using the Italian translation of the relevant pages from Barišić's study and adding further notes on individual verses of the *Bellum Avaricum*. His most important remarks are as follows: (1) regarding the strength of the Avar army, he accepted the total number of 80,000 as mentioned in the *Bellum Avaricum*; (2) the otherwise unknown Philoxenon Gate referred to at the beginning of the Avar siege must have stood in the central section of the Theodosian Walls; (3) George of Pisidia's term "teichos neos" (new wall) is identical with the so-called Monoteichos of Blachernai, the transverse land wall stretching from the Anemas prison to the Golden Horn whose construction began, according to Pertusi, before the beginning of the Avar siege; (4) verses 404–407 were considered to be proof of the sacking of Blachernai along with its Marian church at the beginning of the decisive day of the siege on 7 August; (5) he assessed the mention of a storm which was supposed to have destroyed the Slavic boats as metaphorical, as this natural phenomenon was not backed up by any contem-

porary source but only by later hagiographic tradition; and (6) he was also sceptical of the possibility that verses 502–508 had proclaimed that the most well-known Marian hymn, the Akathistos, had been sung after the end of the siege.⁸²

The selected passages from the *Bellum Avaricum* were commented on by the German Byzantinist P. Speck in his short but provocative monography released in 1980. Speck touches upon several issues dealing with the siege which go beyond the scope of commentary on the *Bellum Avaricum*.⁸³ These specific conclusions will be addressed at appropriate places in this book. Speck only discussed selected verses of the *Bellum Avaricum*. He rightly concluded that George of Pisidia poetically compared the procession of the patriarch Sergios with an image of Christ to a court trial of the Avars.⁸⁴ With regard to the other sources, Speck tried to prove that the Avars did not enter the Blachernai quarter on the final day of the siege. Speck considered the statement in the *Bellum Avaricum* that the barbarians had occupied the places of the Invincible Mother only as proof of the Avars' presence in the wider area of Blachernai. He concluded that access to the Church of the Theotokos had already been blocked by the new Wall of Herakleios.⁸⁵

In 1985, another German Byzantinist, L. Van Dieten, reacted to Speck's most controversial statements.⁸⁶ He rejected that the term "teichos neos" referred to a completely new fortified structure. He also argued that Herakleios's letter ordering such an erection came to Constantinople no sooner than at the beginning of July 626, so there was practically no time to finish it before the start of the siege. According to Van Dieten, the expression "teichos neos" needs to be explained within other orders by Emperor Herakleios to strengthen the city defences on the eve of the Avar attack. George of Pisidia had in mind the previously mentioned wooden palisade and not a wall in the proper sense of the word.⁸⁷ Although Van Dieten disagrees with Speck's arguments regarding the earlier construction of the Wall of Herakleios, he rejected the thesis of Pernice, Stratos, and Barišić that the Avars had taken Blachernai along with the Church of the Theotokos on the final day of the siege; he accepted Speck's conclusion that Pisides had in mind the wider region of Blachernai, which the Avars made their base of operations.⁸⁸

Short historical notes on the *Bellum Avaricum* can be found in another edition of George of Pisidia's poems by L. Tartaglia.⁸⁹ Among his other comments, Tartaglia does not identify the mention of a "new wall" with the construction of the "Monoteichos" of Blachernai. Like Pertusi, Tartaglia

believed that the references to the storm during the final attack were a poetic metaphor and not a real act of nature, as other contemporary sources did not appear to document it. He also doubts another problematic reference which is considered by some scholars to be proof of the singing of the Akathistos after the end of the Avar siege.⁹⁰

The Paschal Chronicle

The official report on the Avar siege in the Paschal Chronicle is indisputably the most important historical source regarding this event. This sober and well-informed text has unfortunately been preserved in a bad condition. The missing folio covering two and a half days of the siege and the poor state of the primary manuscript (Codex Vaticanus Graecus 1941) led P. Speck to the conclusion that the closing remarks of this report did not concern the Avar siege but actually an earlier Avar surprise attack, which he incorrectly dated to 617.⁹¹ In 1985, Van Dieten convincingly questioned this hypothesis and refuted most of Speck's arguments.⁹² In addition, he accepted the information in the Paschal Chronicle that the Avars entered the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai; however, according to him, this was not on the final day of the siege but rather during its course.⁹³

The most expansive historical commentary on this report can be found in the English-language translation of the Paschal Chronicle by Mary and Michael Whitby.⁹⁴ In addition to the explanatory notes, these authors present their own interpretation of important moments during the siege: (1) in contrast to Barišić, they acknowledge the possibility of a coordinated attack by the Avars and Persians; (2) they see Nikephoros's report of the siege as additional evidence of the textual lacuna of the Paschal Chronicle; (3) the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai was unprotected during the siege; and (4) they reject Speck's thesis regarding the textual transposition of the concluding passages of the report.⁹⁵ These conclusions go beyond the scope of this summary and will be treated in the relevant parts of the book.

In 1987, Speck published another paper, which focused on the first and second embassy of the patrician Athanasios to the khagan before the beginning of the Avar siege.⁹⁶ Here Speck drew attention to numerous problematic areas in the Paschal Chronicle, which he again attributed to the poor state of the primary manuscript of the chronicle. It is important to mention that Speck logically reconstructed the series of diplomatic

negotiations between the khagan, the patrician Athanasios, and the council of regents led by magister Bonos and the patriarch Sergios. However, Speck did not examine the reasons behind the violation of the treaty by the Avars in greater detail. Speck was also critical of Van Dieten's evaluation of the report of the incursion of the Avars into the Blachernai church, while still maintaining that this part of the Paschal Chronicle did not refer to the siege of 626 but rather to the previous Avar attack, which he himself dated to 617.⁹⁷

A Homily Attributed to Theodore Synkellos

The first historical commentary on the third contemporary source of the Avar siege—a homily attributed to Theodore Synkellos—appeared in a critical edition by the Polish philologist L. Sternbach.⁹⁸ The main scholarly authority which dealt with the textual tradition of this source in the second half of the twentieth century was S. Szádeczky-Kardoss. In several works, he focused on various versions of this text.⁹⁹ In 1990, alongside his life partner, the philologist and Byzantinist T. Olajos, he published an abridged version of this sermon, which had been preserved in the codex of the Pantokrator Monastery on Athos (BHG 1078m).¹⁰⁰ His colleague F. Makk republished Sternbach's edition of this text with nine suggested conjectures and a French translation.¹⁰¹ This edition included a short commentary which was primarily of an explanatory nature. The most expansive commentary on this sermon appeared in a book by D. Olster, who primarily paid attention to its anti-Judaic tone through which Synkellos and other Christian authors redefined their empire and their enemies to affirm God's love for his "errant people".¹⁰²

Comments on Later Sources

Theophanes and the Patriarch Nikephoros

The *Historia Syntomos* of the Constantinopolitan patriarch Nikephoros and the *Chronographia* of Theophanes are considered as an addition to the primary sources of the Avar siege. In addition to the already quoted selected source anthologies, the most detailed commentary on both accounts was once again written by P. Speck.¹⁰³ He did not analyse Theophanes's report of the siege in great detail, but he did question some of its motifs, such as the division of Herakleios's forces into three parts and

the information regarding the transportation of the Slavic dug-out boats from Danube to Constantinople.¹⁰⁴ Speck gave much more space to the anonymous source on the Avar siege preserved by the patriarch Nikephoros. Here he directed attention to its main part, which discussed the final attack by the Avars and Slavs. In a detailed analysis, he emphasized the sober character of this report, while also pointing out several problematic and contradictory places in it. Contrary to previous authors, he did not consider it to be an addition to primary sources but rather a later attempt to rationally clarify the reasons for the final victory in the Golden Horn.¹⁰⁵

NOTES

1. Among others, cf. Gibbon 1788, 518–521; Le Beau 1830, 119–129; Drapeyron 1869, 220–240; Bury 1889, 239–241; Kulakovskiy 1915, 76–91.
2. Stephenson 2010, 471.
3. Mordtmann 1892, 54–60; 1903, 15–28.
4. Tevyashov 1914, 229–235.
5. Tevyashov 1914, 229.
6. Schlumberger 1917, 1–10.
7. Dirimtekin 1948, 1–24.
8. Pernice 1905, 138–149.
9. Pernice 1905, 146.
10. Kulakovskiy 1915, 76–88.
11. Pernice 1905, 141.
12. Kulakovskiy 1915, 78.
13. Barišić 1954, 371–395.
14. Barišić 1954, 371.
15. Barišić 1954, 390–391.
16. Barišić 1954, 391.
17. Barišić 1954, 392.
18. Stratos 1966, 507–542, and 1968, 173–196 and 373–374.
19. Stratos 1968, 188–189.
20. Stratos 1968, 179, and 1967, 371.
21. Stratos 1968, 194, and 1967, 374–376.
22. Stratos 1967, 376.
23. Lilie 1985, 17–43; Pohl 1988, 255.
24. Waldmüller 1976, 265–283.
25. Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970: 2, 2, 12; Avenarius 1974, 115; Kovačević 1977, 63–66; Szymański and Dąbrowska 1979, 41.
26. Pohl 1988, 248–255 (248), and now 2018, 294–304.

27. Pohl 1988, 249.
28. Pohl 1988, 253 and 428, n. 53.
29. Pohl 1988, 254–255.
30. Kardaras 2010, 121–126, and 2018, 84–87.
31. Havlíková 1979, 126–136.
32. Borovskiy 1988, 114–119.
33. Howard-Johnston 1995, 131–145.
34. Howard-Johnston 1995, 133.
35. Szádeczky-Kardoss 2000, 313–321.
36. Kaegi 2003, 132–139.
37. Soto Chica 2006, 111–134; Kaçar 2017, 171–200.
38. Hurbanič 2006, 52–85; 2009a; 2009b, 129–143; 2010; 2012, 15–24; 2015a, 211–220; 2015b, 75–89; 2016a; 2016b, 271–293; 2017, 81–92.
39. Cf. the recent discussion regarding the topography of the Gate of Saint Romanos: Asutay-Effenberger 2003, 1–4 and 2007, 87–94 and Philippides and Hanak 2011, 335.
40. Paspates 1877, 2–3, 90, Van Millingen 1899, 115–121; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 100–104; Janin 1964, 265; Müller-Wiener 1977, 301–302; Tsangadas 1980, 22–24.
41. Paspates 1877, 2–3, 92 Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 26.
42. Paspates 1877, 83–98; Van Millingen 1899, 115–121; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 102–104; Müller-Wiener 1977, 301–302; Tsangadas 1980, 22–32; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 13–27; Philippides and Hanak 2011, 344–357.
43. Among others, cf. Van Millingen 1899, 164–166; Pernice 1905, 140–141; Kulakovskiy 1915, 78; Pertusi 1959, 217–218; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 102–104 and 301–302; Müller-Wiener 1977, 301–302; Tsangadas 1980, 24–26, 29–31; Speck 1980, 34–38 (cf. also his map on 37); Paribeni 1988, 215–220 (who proposed a triangular shape of the original fortifications of Blachernai); Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 180–181, n. 478; Philippides and Hanak 2011, 344.
44. Asutay-Effenberger 2007.
45. Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 22–26.
46. Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 23–25. The conclusions of Asutay-Effenberger were accepted by the Hungarian archaeologist G. Csiky (2012, 165–183).
47. Cf. chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
48. Grumel 1964, 217–233; cf. also Mango 2001, 22–25.
49. Stratos 1968, 189–190 and 373–374.
50. Stratos 1968, 190.
51. Stratos 1968, 190.
52. Tsangadas 1980, 80–106.

53. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 102–104 and 118. In this connection, cf. also Müller-Wiener 1977, 301.
54. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 102–104; Tsangadas 1980, 97–100.
55. Tsangadas 1980, 100.
56. Tsangadas 1980, 86–87, 94.
57. Tsangadas 1980, 91–93.
58. Tsangadas 1980, 95.
59. Tsangadas 1980, 104–106.
60. Cf. the chapter “Army of Besiegers”.
61. Among others, cf. Labuda 1949, 175 and 190; Grafenauer 1950, 78–79; Barišić 1954, 376, n. 2, 394, n. 2; Waldmüller 1976, 281; Havlíková 1979, 131–133; Borovskiy 1988, 114–111; Ivanov 1995, 80; Litavrin 1995a, 236 n. 5.
62. Nagy 2009, 258–269; Kardaras 2018, 176–181.
63. Dennis 1998, 99–115; Chevedden 2000, 71–114; Kardaras 2005, 53–65; Petersen 2013, 406–429.
64. Petersen 2013, 632–636.
65. Hošek 1974, 101–103; Oračev 1982, 103–109; Strässle 1990, 95; Havlíková 1990, 94–96; Vryonis 2003, 74–75.
66. Hošek 1974, 101–103. The tying of monoxyles together has already been mentioned by Pertusi (1959, 223) and later by Tartaglia (1998, 185, n. 73). Both authors emphasized that this was done for improving the stability of such boats; however, they did not add any further comments on this.
67. Vryonis 2003, 68–75.
68. Pertusi 1959, 216–217; Haldon 1995, 147, n. 16; Speck 1980, 46–47 and 1988, 131–132. Cf. also Van Dieten 1985, 173–175.
69. Hurbanič 2012 15–24; 2015, 211–220; and 2017, 81–92.
70. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1980, 306–312.
71. For the individual hagiographical and liturgical testimonies, cf. the chapter “The Sources”.
72. Recently: Peltomaa 2009, 284–298.
73. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1903, 5–27; Spadaro 1991, 247–264; Hurbanič 2009b, 129–143; Vorob’yev 2016, 321–337. Cf. also the chapter “The Akathistos”.
74. For the general surveys: Garidis 1977–1984, 99–114. For the frescoes preserved in Macedonia: Knežević 1966, 254; Grozdanov 1979, 277–287; Velmans 1972, 138; Garidis 1977–1984, 105; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 655, 669, 698; in Romania: Tafrafi 1924, 456–461; Grecu 1924, 273–289; Ulea 1963, 29–71; Meinardus 1972, 169–183; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1991, 84, 660, 667–669 and 1991, 455–456. Most recently, Costea 2011, 136–142 and Sullivan 2017, 31–68. For a useful overview

- of previous research: Ciobanu 2005, 17–32. For the pictorial cycles of Akathistos with the scene of siege of Constantinople in the Russia: Scheffer 1946, 8–10; Meinardus 1976, 113–121; Salikova 1998, 53–68; Kvlividze 2003, 81–85; Kazakevich 2006, 95–96 (and others). For the scenes of the siege of Constantinople as preserved in the pictorial cycle of Archangel Michael, cf. Gabelić 2004, 207–211; Koukiars, 2006 (esp. 155–157).
75. Pertusi 1959, Van Dieten 1972, 15, and 174–178.
 76. Van Dieten 1972, 15, and 174–178; Av. Cameron 1979a, 3–25 (esp. 21–24); Pentcheva 2002, 2–41; Speck 2003, 266–271. For more general surveys, cf. Baynes 1955a, 248–260; Alexander 1962, 339–357.
 77. Pentcheva 2002, 2–41.
 78. Pentcheva 2006.
 79. Cf. esp. Ostrogorski and Barišić 1955, 143–172, 217–221, 239–240; Dujčev et al. 1960, 41–67, 78–84, 171–174, 259–260, 293–294; Chichurov 1980, pp. 58–59, 98–99, 102–104, 153, 172–173; Brzóstkowska and Swoboda, 1995, 8–29, 51–52, 120–121, 257; Ivanov, Litavrin and Ronin 1995, 65–90; 226–227, 272–273, and 310–311; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998, 171–207.
 80. Quercius and Fogginius 1777, 55–65.
 81. Pertusi 1959, 201–224.
 82. Pertusi 1959 (1) 215; (2) 215–216; (3) 217–218; (4) 222; (5) 223–224; (6) 224.
 83. Speck 1980.
 84. Speck 1980, 27–29 and 2003, 267–268.
 85. Speck 1980, 34–41.
 86. Van Dieten 1985, 149–178.
 87. Van Dieten 1985, 164–165.
 88. Van Dieten 1985, 171.
 89. Tartaglia 1998, 156–191.
 90. Tartaglia 1998, 174, n. 50; 187, No. 77; 189, n. 84.
 91. Speck (1980, 42–43 1987, 377–378) accepted Saturday 5 June as preserved in the Paschal Chronicle, but not the given year (623). He therefore accepted the solution of N. Baynes (1912, 122–125), who looked for the nearest year when the day of the week and month would coincide (617). Cf. also Stratos 1981, 115–118; Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 203–204.
 92. Van Dieten 1985, 149–177.
 93. Van Dieten 1985, 171–172.
 94. Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989.
 95. Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 169–181.
 96. Speck 1987, 371–402.

97. Speck 1987, 393–394.
98. Sternbach 1900, 333–334.
99. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1976, 173–184; 1978a, 87–95; 1982–1984 (1988), 443–450; cf. also 1990–1992, 169–175.
100. Szádeczky-Kardoss and Olajos 1990, 147–182.
101. Makk 1975, 5.
102. Olster 1994, 73–78.
103. Speck 1988, 131–133 (Theophanes) and 298–317 (Nikephoros). For Speck’s analysis of the intercepted letter and the subsequent story of Shahrbaraz’s treason, cf. 144–152 (Theophanes) and 292–298 (Nikephoros).
104. Speck 1988, 131–132; cf. also Speck 1980, 46–47.
105. Speck 1988, 314.

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The Last War of Antiquity

At the beginning of the seventh century, the peaceful coexistence of the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia was still guaranteed by a treaty of 591, but its results disrupted the previous strategical balance of power.¹ For the first time since the fourth century, both states had agreed on major territorial adjustments—this time in the form of concessions made by the young Persian king Khusro II in exchange for decisive Roman help in the war against the usurper Bahram Chobin.² The Roman emperor Maurikios benefited from the internal Persian struggle and reclaimed previously lost territory in Roman Mesopotamia, including the important fortresses of Dara and Martyropolis. In addition, he also obtained Arzanene, most of Persarmenia, and Iberia.³ These forced concessions, together with Roman control of the key mountain passes in Mesopotamia and Armenia, represented a possible future strategic threat to central areas of Persia and its capital, Ctesiphon.⁴ The Romans also liberated themselves from the duty to pay Persia any subsidies which had been established by a peace treaty in 562.⁵ The significance of these payments was more of an ideological nature than an economic one; they served to emphasize the superiority of the Persian king over his Western rival.⁶

Khusro did not try to revise this treaty until the end of the rule of Maurikios, primarily because of the persistent widespread revolts of his uncle, Bindoe, who was essentially an independent ruler of the northern Persian territories until 600/601.⁷ However, in 602 the rebellious Roman army declared Centurion Phokas as the new Roman emperor. As a result,

Phokas conducted a bloody coup in Constantinople and overthrew Emperor Maurikios and his sons.⁸ This military usurpation gave Khusro an excuse to annul the treaty of 591. The upcoming war was going to be led in the name of Theodosios, the eldest son of Maurikios, who had found refuge in Persia, but was probably a false claimant to the throne.⁹ Khusro invaded Roman Mesopotamia and besieged the key fortress of Dara in the second half of 603.¹⁰ At the same time, there was a revolt of the Eastern Roman army led by the *magister militum* Narses in Edessa who, however, did not actively support the Persian invasion.¹¹ While besieging Dara, the Persians started an offensive in that part of Persarmenia, which had been occupied by the Romans since 591.¹² Given the situation, Phokas had to quickly arrange a peace with the Lombards in the autumn of 603, and by the end of the same year a new agreement with the Avars as well, so that he could concentrate all available military forces on the eastern front.¹³ In the spring of 604, the new Roman army transferred from the Balkans under the eunuch Leontios was able to defeat Narses's revolt, but ultimately it could not break the Persian blockade of Dara.¹⁴ Leontios suffered a major defeat in the battle of the Arzamon River, south of Mardin. The Persian shah, who almost died in this struggle, was eventually able to successfully complete the siege of Dara in the summer of 604.¹⁵ However, after this he refused to participate in further military operations and left the leadership of his armies to his commanders.

The fall of Dara shook the new regime in Constantinople and encouraged the internal opposition to organize resistance. However, Phokas discovered an upcoming plot among the senators and consequently eliminated the last members of Maurikios's family, including the widow of Emperor Constantia and her daughters, alongside the other conspirators.¹⁶ The Persians gradually conquered essential fortresses in Roman Mesopotamia, and by 605 they had gained supreme control of all the remaining territories in Persarmenia.¹⁷ After a yearlong pause, the Persian army along with Theodosios secured Theodosiupolis, an important fortress in Roman Armenia, without a fight.¹⁸ This was probably the last effort of the alleged son of Maurikios, who was most likely poisoned under unclear circumstances.¹⁹ Khusro continued to use Maurikios's death as the *casus belli*, but after the death of Theodosios he could no longer act as the restorer of the rightful line of succession in the Roman Empire. At this point, it was clear that he did not want to revise the 591 treaty any longer; he wanted to expand his realm at the expense of his Western neighbour. The Persians systematically banished the pro-Roman Dyophysite

clergy from the occupied Roman territories, and their properties and churches were given to the rival non-Chalcedonian Miaphysites.²⁰ On the one hand, Khusro guaranteed the Miaphysites freedom of religion, but on the other hand he did not respect the traditional rights of their Patriarchate of Antioch.²¹ He also used tactics of power against his own Persian church, and from 609 he no longer appointed a new *katholikos* for that community.²² However, Khusro did not prefer either of the two alienated communities and did not support the spread of Zoroastrianism in the occupied territories at the expense of Christianity.²³

THE REVOLT IN CARTHAGE

The internal and external crises of Phokas's regime caused an open revolt in Carthage in 608 led by Herakleios the Younger.²⁴ The rebels conquered Egypt and its capital, Alexandria, in 609/610, and later they managed to defend it from Phokas's loyalists led by the *comes Orientis* Bonossos.²⁵ Meanwhile, the Persians took advantage of the internal struggle of the empire and secured the remaining fortresses in Roman Mesopotamia, getting dangerously close to the vulnerable Eastern part of the empire. The growing spread of violence in the cities was intensified by civil war and traditional hatred between the Blue and Green circus factions.²⁶ At the beginning of 610, the remaining followers of Emperor Phokas moved from Egypt to Constantinople.²⁷ In summer, Herakleios undertook a decisive naval attack against the capital and his fleet appeared before its walls at the beginning of October. Phokas attempted to organize the defence with the help of members of both circus factions.²⁸ However, the Greens, supporting the rebels, provoked a revolt, as a consequence of which the military resistance actually ceased to exist.²⁹ Herakleios entered Constantinople triumphantly and settled accounts with his predecessor and his followers with cruelty in the spirit of vengeance for their previous wrongdoings.³⁰ Phokas entered history as a bloodthirsty villain, but history was written by the victors, and Herakleios and his intellectual entourage assigned him the entire responsibility for previous as well as future failures.³¹ Although Herakleios acted as the legitimate successor of Emperor Maurikios and as his avenger, his coup was actually only another military usurpation.³²

Although it is true that Phokas failed to stop the Persian offensive, there was initially some fighting in the border areas of Mesopotamia and Armenia. The distinctive turning point occurred later at the time of the

outbreak of rebellion under Herakleios and the following civil war in the empire, which had run out of the necessary resources for fighting its expanding eastern neighbour. However, holding Phokas responsible for collapsing the Lower Danube frontier, and the subsequent massive migration of Slavs into the Balkans, is not justified.³³

A DECADE OF DEFEATS

The new Emperor Herakleios eliminated a rebellion by part of the Roman army led by Phokas's brother Komentiolos, but he failed to make peace with the Persian king.³⁴ For this reason, like Phokas, he had to concentrate all available resources on fighting the Persians, whereas other vulnerable areas of the empire, such as Italy and the Balkans, were protected by new treaties with the Lombards and Avars.³⁵ In the autumn of 611, the Persians began their main offensive in Syria and conquered several towns in its northern part, including Antioch.³⁶ The second Persian attack, under the leadership of Shahen, went across Armenia to the inland of Asia Minor and ended with the temporary occupation of Kaisareia.³⁷ As a consequence of the adverse development on the battlefields, as well as the absence of capable and especially loyal commanders, Herakleios ultimately took supreme command of the Eastern Roman army himself. In 613, he attempted to renew the connection with eastern parts of the empire; however, he suffered a great defeat at Antioch which sealed the fate of Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.³⁸

In the following year, the Persian army, under the leadership of their experienced commander Shahrbaraz, invaded Palestine with practically no resistance.³⁹ The Persians also captured its capital Kaisareia without a fight.⁴⁰ The local Jews and Samaritans directly supported the Persian invasion in that area.⁴¹ Many messianic expectations came alive in their minds recalling the former liberation of the Jews from Babylon's capture by the Persians.⁴² Moreover, the situation in the Holy Land was destabilized by the attacks of Arab raiders.⁴³

The Persians occupied Jerusalem without a fight and left a garrison there. A few months later the situation dramatically changed. There was a massive revolt led by the followers of the circus factions, who killed the Persians and local Jews. Shahrbaraz decided to suppress this riot, and in the second half of April he started to besiege Jerusalem. After about twenty days, he managed to take the city, where he carried out a bloody massacre.⁴⁴ The local churches, including the Holy Sepulchre, were also damaged.⁴⁵

Shahrbaraz eventually left Jerusalem but held its large population captive.⁴⁶ He also seized several valuables, including the fragments of the True Cross.⁴⁷ The fall of Jerusalem symbolized a wound for Herakleios's regime. However, a much greater misfortune was the destructive psychological impact on the morale of the imperial population and on all of Christianity. This great defeat could not be expressed more convincingly than by the loss of the True Cross, a victorious symbol of Roman emperors that gave the statute of a unique Christian city to Jerusalem.⁴⁸

Moreover, at the end of the summer of 614, the Persians, led by Shahen from Ctesiphon, carried out a diversionary action that kept the remaining imperial forces in Asia Minor.⁴⁹ Probably at the beginning of 615, Shahen approached Constantinople and set up camp between Chalcedon and Chrysopolis on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus. Herakleios met with the Persian commander in person, and with his help he attempted to negotiate with Khusro.⁵⁰ His emissaries carried a letter to Ctesiphon written in the name of the Constantinopolitan senate, because the Persian king considered Herakleios to be just another usurper. For this reason, the Roman senators emphasized the legitimacy of Herakleios's election as they believed he was the one who had sought vengeance for the tragic death of Emperor Maurikios by removing Phokas.⁵¹ The senators thus indirectly indicated to Khusro that his main reason for the war had passed away. Therefore, they recommended he spiritually adopt Herakleios, who in return expressed his readiness to perform service of every kind to the supreme Persian king.⁵²

Shahen went on a return journey with the Roman ambassadors, but when he learned about the unexpected counteroffensive of the Eastern Roman army in Persamenia led by Philippikos, he began its fruitless pursuit.⁵³ This diversion can only be seen in terms of attempts at peace if we acknowledge that it was ordered before the outcome of negotiations between Herakleios and Shahen was known.⁵⁴ After getting familiar with the content of the message, Khusro refused to accept the deal sanctioning his hegemonial status against his Roman rival and he had the envoys imprisoned, which was contrary to traditional diplomatic practice.⁵⁵ He undoubtedly supported a plan leading to the complete destruction of the Eastern Roman Empire.⁵⁶ Khusro probably demonstratively enforced this decision against a part of the opposition of his own aristocracy.⁵⁷ His uncompromising attitude was more likely influenced by present victories rather than the frequently postulated policy of restoring the former territories of *Achaemenid* Persia.⁵⁸

After the collapse of these negotiations, Herakleios found himself in a quite complicated situation and faced an increasing shortage of financial resources. In Italy, he suppressed the rebellion of the local army and ensured the prolongation of a truce with the Lombards.⁵⁹ However, the lack of military cadres on the Lower Danube border led to its definitive collapse and saw the penetration of Slavs to inland areas of the Balkans.⁶⁰ It was probably the Slavs rather than the Avars who in ca. 615 attacked previously untouched Roman cities such as Naissos and Sardike, which lay on the strategically important *Via Militaris*.⁶¹ In ca. 618, the Avars finally broke the peace with the empire and militarily supported the Slavs at Thessalonica, which they unsuccessfully besieged for a whole month.⁶²

After the occupation of Syria and Palestine, Shahrbaraz and Shahen attacked Kilikia in Asia Minor.⁶³ The Eastern Roman army probably withdrew to the hilly inland of Isauria, as is demonstrated by the activity of local mints. However, the last mint stopped its activity in Nicomedia in 619.⁶⁴ In 619, Persian troops eventually occupied Alexandria and the rest of the province by the middle of 621.⁶⁵ The loss of Egypt was a severe defeat for the Eastern Roman Empire, and Herakleios was forced to revoke a centennial privilege of free allocations of bread for selected groups of inhabitants in Constantinople, where the shortage of crops was obvious and a minor plaque epidemic and hunger had broken out. However, Herakleios eventually found other sources, probably from northern Africa, where he allegedly planned to move the centre of the empire.⁶⁶

Being in hopeless situation, Herakleios eventually began to gather all available reserves. He began to mint a new silver coin, known as the hexagram, and with its overvaluation he successfully decreased expenses on the army and administration by half.⁶⁷ He gained other necessary financial resources through a loan from the church, and he subsequently ordered the melting down of various liturgical vessels from the Hagia Sophia to mint new gold and silver coins, part of which was probably used for the payment of a new tribute to the Avars.⁶⁸ After securing the rear, he concentrated almost all combat-ready soldiers in the north-western part of Asia Minor, and after a series of training camps he personally took command of the army.⁶⁹

Herakleios might have been successful only thanks to the good organization of individual formations and increased discipline in an otherwise almost lost conflict. The Roman army consisted of various ethnic groups, including loyal Berber troops from northern Africa and probably a part of the Arab *foederati*.⁷⁰ Among others, Armenians and later other allies from

the Caucasus participated in military operations. The total force of the imperial army consisted of approximately 15,000 men.⁷¹ Before beginning the expedition, the emperor motivated soldiers through fiery appeals to religion. He began his fight with a sacred standard: a miraculous image of Christ not made by human hands against the enemies of the Christian faith, who bowed to created things and desecrated the altars of churches with blood.⁷²

In 622, after years of calamities and defeats, Herakleios resolved to start a new offensive against the Persians.⁷³ The concentration of all available military forces of the empire was perhaps a reaction to the recent Persian invasion led by Shahrbaraz into the north-eastern part of Asia Minor. Both armies finally met in a battle in the late autumn or early winter of 622. The battle ended with a surprising Roman victory.⁷⁴ Herakleios then unexpectedly interrupted the campaign. If he had not been obliged to return to the capital, he would have most probably continued his operations in the following year since he had left the army stationed in the Pontic region near the Caucasus, that is, in a region of the highest strategic importance for any future operations against Persia.⁷⁵

NOTES

1. Blockley 1985, 73–74.
2. On this restoration, cf. Higgins 1939, 27–30 and 1941, 307–315; Mich. Whitby 1988, 292–304; Riedlberger 1998, 161–75; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 172–173.
3. For a debate on the extent of such concessions, see Honigmann 1935, 29–30; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 28; Hewsen 1992, 18–25 (map 4); Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 28–37.
4. Shahid 2004, 235; Howard-Johnston 2010b, 59.
5. Mich. Whitby 1988, 306; Howard-Johnston 1995b, 214. On the importance of these payments: Blockley 1985, 62–74; Borm 2008, 327–346. The subsidies policy of the late Roman Empire is discussed by Gordon 1949, 60–69.
6. Both Borm (2008, 334–341) and Payne (2013, 12) rightly stressed the symbolical value of such tributes, but these were rarely paid on a regular basis. Instead of this, the Persians often received a single lump sum which might be calculated in a retroactive manner covering previous years without such payments (Maksymiuk 2016, 149–157). The single amount of 792,000 solidi paid by Justinian in 532 could hardly be treated as a purely symbolic gesture.

7. Pourshariati 2008, 131–133; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 179–180; Mich. Whitby 1988, 306.
8. Olster 1993, 40–65; Kaegi 1981, 110–118; Mich. Whitby 1988, 165–169.
9. Cf. previous discussion on his identity by Stratos (1968, 55–56); Ludwig (1991, 75–78) and Speck (1993, 222–227). Cf. also Olster 1993, 91; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 196. The earliest testimony of his death can be found in the contemporary letter of the Roman Pope Gregory (*Registrum* 13.1, 365) dated to September 603. The account of John of Antioch is simple and based on rumours (548.17–19), and this can be also stated for the Armenian Ps.-Sebeos (31, 57). These rumours were rejected by Theophylaktos Simokattes (8.15.8, 314). Of course, it cannot be ruled out that Theodosios really managed to escape (Stratos 1968, 74 and Howard-Johnston 2010a, 437). However, the way he disappeared from the scene causes suspicion, especially when compared to the escape of young Khusro II who got a massive support from several important Persian dignitaries and a significant part of their army against the usurper Bahram Chobin. In previous years, at least two false Persian claimants had taken refuge in Constantinople. The first fugitive claimed to be Kabad, the son of Zames and the grandson of the Persian emperor Kavad (Prokopios *Bella*, 1.23.23–24, 121–122). The second one pretended to be the son of the Persian king Khusro I and had managed to escape from Persia after his death (John of Ephesus, 6.29, 439–442). Despite their evidently doubtful origin, both were allowed to stay at the court in Constantinople.
10. Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 184; Thomson and Howard-Johnston (1999, 198) and Howard-Johnston (2010a, 61; 2010b, 438) dated the beginning of this attack to the spring of 603.
11. On this revolt: Kaegi 1981, 152–153; Olster 1993, 92–93; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 197.
12. Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 198–201.
13. Paulus Diaconus, 4.32, 127. Cf. Christou 1991, 158. It seems that Phokas just paid a higher tribute to the Avars (Theophanes, 292.11–14); there is no reference to a new peace treaty with them that would be the result of a previous conflict. This tribute was probably increased to 140,000 solidi. Cf. also Pohl 1988, 247.
14. *Khuzistan Chronicle*, 30.
15. Flusin 1992, 71–74.
16. *Chronicon Paschale*, 695.2–5 and 696.6–697.3; Theophanes, 293.8–23 and 294.27–295.13; 297.12–298.4.
17. Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 198–202. On the problematic chronology of the Persian attacks in Mesopotamia, cf. Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 185–186.

18. Ps.-Sebeos, 33, 63; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 201.
19. *Chronicon Seert*, 2.2.79, 520. This is the only source which explicitly mentions his death. If this was the case, one can only speculate who really was behind this crime. Perhaps Theodosios did not meet the expectations of Khusrō, or his restoration ceased to be a prime Persian aim as Howard-Johnston (2010b, 62) has concluded.
20. Michael the Syrian, 10.25, 379; Severus of Ashmunein, 481.
21. Flusin 1992, 112–113 and most recently Wood 2013, 200.
22. Flusin 1992, 110; Hoyland 1997, 177.
23. Most authors emphasized the loss of Nestorian influence at the expense of the competing Miaphysites. Cf. Flusin 1992, 106–118 and Wood 2013, 197–211. It seems that Khusrō pursued a pragmatic policy towards both Christian communities, as is stated by Greatrex (2006, 49–52).
24. Olster 1993, 117–121, Borkowski 1981, 23–43; Kaegi 2003, 37–43. On the Herakleian dynastic iconography: Rösch 1979, 51–62; Olster 1982, 399–408 and Kaegi 2003, 40–42.
25. John of Nikiou, 107, 421–427.
26. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, 58–60, 160; *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.10, 82–83, 112–113; *Doctrina Jacobi*, 1.40, 129, 131; Strategios, 2.1–4, 3–4; Ps.-Sebeos, 31, 57; Michael the Syrian, 10.25, 378. Cf. Al. Cameron 1976, 147–148; Olster 1994, 101–115; Mich. Whitby 1999, 244–245; Liebeschuetz 2001, 274–278 and Booth, 2011, 593–601.
27. Cf. Olster 1993, 125–127, and Kaegi 2003, 45.
28. On the possible route to Constantinople: Kaegi 2003, 45–47.
29. Olster 1993, 127–138; Kaegi 2003, 48–50.
30. *Chronicon Paschale*, 700–701; John of Antioch, 552, 554; Nikephoros I, 34.17–36.51, John of Nikiou, 110, 432–422.
31. For a general overview, cf. Olster (1993, 3–5) and more recently Meier (2014, 143, n. 11), who clearly outlined the basic tendencies in shaping the memory of Emperor Phokas by the contemporary Greek authors (2014, 159–174).
32. Meier 2014, 151.
33. Ps.-Sebeos, 31, 57. The collapse of the Danube frontier and the subsequent Slavization of the Balkans has been linked in the past with the disastrous reign of Emperor Phokas: Grafenauer 1950, 74; Ostrogorsky 1959, 4; Stratos 1968, 66; Ditten 1978, 94; Fine 1983, 33. For more cautious views, cf. Charanis 1959, 37; Avenarius 1974, 109 and Waldmüller 1976, 247. For a long time, it was only Barišić (1956, 77–88) who rightly questioned these results stressing the unreliability of the few preserved sources. His conclusions have been further strengthened by various scholars: among others, cf. Weithmann 1981, 81; Lilie 1985, 17–43; Pohl 1988, 125 a

- 237; Olster, 1993, 69; Whittow 1996, 74; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 196; Curta 2001, 106–107. Despite such claims, the old thesis on the territorial losses in the Balkans under Phokas is still presented by Meier (2014, 150). The lower Danube limes probably only ceased to exist after the conclusion of the treaty with the Avars in 604 (Madgearu 2006, 156, cf. also 1996, 56–57; 1997, 10; 2007, 266).
34. For this revolt: *Vita Theodori Syceotae*, 152, 121–123; Kaegi 1979, 221–227, and 1981, 142–143. The proposal of peace by Herakleios can be found in various Greek and Syro-Arabic chronicles, but these all go back to the common Eastern source: Theophanes, 300.21–25; Agapios, 450; *Chronicon AD 1234*, 91, 177; Michael the Syrian, 11.1, 400; *Chronicon Seert*, 2.2.82, 527. An independent testimony is preserved by Ps.-Sebeos (34, 66), but his mention of the claimant Theodosios being installed as the true emperor by Khusro seems to be an anachronism as he died prior to 610. It seems improbable that Herakleios could dispatch his messengers to Khusro in the wake of Komentiolos's revolt, and such a view is also supported by the statement of the Constantinopolitan senators in their official letter to Khusro from 615. Cf. Kaegi 1979, 223; Kalogeras 2004, 289.
 35. Paulus Diaconus, 4.40, 133. Cf. Christou 1991, 160–161. The new treaty with the Avars is not mentioned, but there is no trace of their attacks at the beginning of Herakelios's reign.
 36. *Chronicon AD 724*, 113; *Chronicon AD 1234*, 92, 177; Michael the Syrian 11.1, 400; Agapios, 450; Theophanes, 299.14–18. For a chronology cf. Flusin 1992, 78.
 37. Ps.-Sebeos, 33, 64–65; *Vita Theodori Syceotae*, 153, 123.1–3. The other chroniclers (Theophanes, 299.31–32; Michael the Syrian, 11.1, 400; *Chronicon AD 1234*, 92, 177–178) go back to common material. The sack of Melitene and the raid into Pisidia might have occurred later (Ps.-Sebeos, 34, 66; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 203–204).
 38. Ps.-Sebeos, 34, 68. *Vita Theodori Syceotae* 166, 153–154. The other chronicles all depend on the lost common source: *Chronicon AD 1234*, 92, 177; Michael the Syrian, 11.1, 400.
 39. Ps.-Sebeos, 34, 68; Strategios, 3.2, 5; Flusin 1992, 152–154; Schick 1995, 20–26.
 40. Flusin 1992, 153; Russell 2001, 43, and Schick 1995, 23. Contra Sivan (2004, 83) points out the two unearthed layers of destruction dating to the early seventh century.
 41. *Doctrina Jacobi*, 4.5, 181, 183 and 5.12, 203; Ps.-Sebeos, 34, 68; Eutychios, 98–99. The precise nature and scope of the participation of the Jews is still a matter of discussion: Horowitz 1998 1–39; Schick 1995 26–31; Av. Cameron 1994, 75–93 and 1996, 249–274; Sivan 2004, 85–88.

42. Wilken 1992, 204 and 207–214; Sivan 2000, 277–306 and Van Bekkum 2002, 95–112.
43. All accounts are taken from the same source: Theophanes, 300.17–18; Michael the Syrian, 11.1, 401. Agapios, 451. Cf. Flusin 1992, 153–154, 177–178; Schick 1995, 31–33. Shahid (1995, 636–641) ascribed these raids to the nomad pastoralists from Palestine and the Arab peninsula and not to the Ghassanid foederates who should have been reaffirming their alliance with the empire at this time.
44. Strategios, 8.5–26, 13–16; Ps.-Sebeos 34, 69–70. The inconsistencies of these primary sources regarding the dating of the siege have been discussed by Flusin (1992, 147) and Thomson and Howard-Johnston (1999, 207). Cf. also *Khuzistan Chronicle*, 50–52. An overview of all the relevant sources is given by Stoyanov (2011, 11–23) on that siege: Flusin 1992 151–181; Schick 1995 33–39; Avni 2010, 34–48; Petersen 2013, 623–624.
45. For a list of destroyed churches: Schick 1995, 328–359.
46. Strategios, 18.17, 39; Ps.-Sebeos, 34, 69–70; for other sources: Flusin 1992, 164–170.
47. *Khuzistan Chronicle*, 52 and Al-Tabari, 318. Cf. Howard-Johnston 2006, 12.
48. Drijvers 2002, 176. Only one contemporary Latin chronicle, that of Isidore of Seville (478), mentioned this event.
49. *Acta Martyris Anastasii Persae* 8, 49; *Chronicon Paschale*, 706.11–15; Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 78; *Continuatio Havniensis*, 339.
50. Nikephoros 6, 44.7–46.53 and Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 78–79. On this meeting and the subsequent embassy cf. Kalogeras 2004, 269–296.
51. *Chronicon Paschale*, 707–708; Nikephoros, 6, 46.1–48.12.
52. *Chronicon Paschale*, 709.16–19.
53. *Acta Martyris Anastasii Persae*, 8, 49 and Ps.-Sebeos, 34, 67–68. It is quite complicated to harmonize the information from both sources. It cannot be excluded that the report of Ps.-Sebeos is related to an earlier counteroffensive by Philippikos that is listed in the chronicle prior to the defeat of Herakleios by Antioch in 613. Supporters of just one counteroffensive are aware of the problematic points and the contradictions of the sources. The report of Ps.-Sebeos does not necessarily need to be problematic, given that his lack of a more precise chronology is a common occurrence. Cf. Flusin 1992, 83–93 and Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 205. Cf. also Gelzer 1893, 170–171.
54. This military diversion would then explain the change of attitude of Shahan towards the Roman ambassadors who were imprisoned after their arrival in Persia.
55. Nikephoros, 7, 48.20–22.

56. Shahid 2004, 225–227; Kaegi 2003, 65; Howard-Johnston 2008, 82; 2010b, 440; Frendo 1985, 30–36. Recently, Payne (2013, 30–31) stressed the fact that this decision by Khusro put an end to the previous concept of a bipolar world as well as the traditional Persian hegemonial policy towards Rome which was shaped by Iranian cosmology and based on demanding tributes and territories.
57. Mosig-Walburg 2009, 203; cf. also Howard-Johnston 2014, 169–171.
58. It seems that this factor did not play any significant role in Khusro's policy. In general, the influence of Achaemenid heritage on Sasanian policy is hard to prove, as several authors have pointed out: Yarshater, 1971; 517–531; Huysse 2002, 297–311 and Kettenhofen 2002, 49–75. For an opposing view: Dignas—Winter 2007, 53–60 and Shahid 2004, 226–228 and 238–243.
59. *Vita Deusededit* 319; *Continuatio Havniensis*, 339; Paulus Diaconus, 4.34, 128; *Vita Bonifatii*, 321. Cf. also Stratos 1968, 121–122; Kaegi 2003, 93–94.
60. The only, though not entirely reliable, chronology is based on the discoveries of the last coins from these fortresses. In some cases, they were found in the burned layers: Scorpan 1980, 129–131; Madgearu 1996, 54; Zahariade 2006, 231–232; cf. recently Kardaras 2018, 69–79.
61. It is difficult to answer who was behind these attacks on the Roman towns. The author of *The Miracles of Saint Demetrios* rather vaguely mentioned that the inhabitants of Naissos and Sardike experienced their own siege before their escape to Thessalonica. Pohl (1988, 242) concluded that the attackers were more probably troops led by the Avar khagan rather than the independently attacking Slavs. An opposing view has been raised by Bóna (2000, 171), who attributes this destruction to the Slavs. There are no further details on these attacks, but according to the last coins from the period, the cities could have fallen sometime after 615. Popović 1975, 502 and 1980, 247–248.
62. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.2.195–215, 184–189. Cf. Pohl 1988, 242–243; Petersen 2013, 628–631. For the dating of this attack: Barišić 1953, 98–100; Lemerle 1981, 91–94, 99–103.
63. Ps.-Sebeos, 34, 66; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 204.
64. Russell 2001, 59, 62; Hendy 1985, 416.
65. Theophanes, 301.9–11; Agapios, 451; Michael the Syrian, 11.1, 401; *Chronicon AD 1234*, 93, 178; *Khuzistan Chronicle*, 52, 54. Cf. Kaegi 2003, 91–93. On the Persian occupation of Egypt: Altheim-Stiehl 1992, 87–96; Gariboldi 2009, 321–350; Sängner 2011, 653–665. On the possible identification of Saralaneozan, the highest Persian dignitary from Egypt with commander Shahrbaraz, cf. Banaji 2015, 27–42.

66. *Chronicon Paschale*, 711.11–15. Cf. Teall 1959, 91, and Howard-Johnston 1995a, 136. On the plague: *Miracula Sancti Artemii* 34, 178.5–7; Nikephoros, 12, 48.1–6 and George Monachos, 669.16–20. For commentary: Stathakopoulos 2004, 342–34. On the possible transfer of the capital to Carthage: Nikephoros, 8, 48.6–16 (discussed by Van Dieten 1972, 8–9 and Kaegi 2003, 88).
67. *Chronicon Paschale*, 706.9–12. Cf. Yannopoulos 1978, 102–108; Hendy 1985, 494–495.
68. Theophanes, 302.34–303.3; Nikephoros, 11, 54.1–3. On the dating of these measures: Van Dieten 1972, 10 (621); Stratos 1968, 127, and Howard-Johnston 1999, 34–35. The raising of the tribute to the Avars is specially mentioned by Theophanes (302.27–30).
69. On the military exercises: George of Pisidia: *Expeditio Persica* 2, 120–162; Theophanes, 303.12–17 and 304.3–11; in this regard: Howard-Johnston 1999, 36; Rance 2000, 223–275.
70. Shahid 1995, 641–646.
71. Howard-Johnston 2004, 101.
72. George of Pisidia *Expeditio Persica* 2, v. 79–119, 92, 94. On this propaganda: Howard-Johnston 1999, 36–38. For previous use of the religious factor in the Roman–Persian wars, see Frendo 1997, 105–112.
73. On this campaign: Gerland 1894, 340–348; Stratos 1979, 63–74; Oikonomides 1975, 269–281; Zuckerman 1988, 206–210; Howard-Johnston 1999, 3–4; and Poláček 2008, 105–124.
74. According to a vague but valuable fact mentioned by George of Pisidia (*Expeditio Persica* 2, v. 256, 104), both armies met in battle sometime at the turn of autumn and winter in 622.
75. George of Pisidia *Expeditio Persica* 3, v. 339–340, 130; Theophanes, 306.7–8; cf. also Baynes, 1912, 126.

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CHAPTER 5

The Siege in Context

Herakleios had to return to Constantinople following disturbing news concerning the Avars, who probably did not break the peace openly and only threatened with a new invasion.¹ As soon as he returned to the capital, he attempted to negotiate with their khagan. In the spring of 623, the Avars openly broke the peace and invaded Thrace.² Herakleios really needed a new treaty, but its background is a matter of dispute. However, it can be assumed that the main issue was the increase in the tribute. Under the pressure of a desperate situation, Herakleios agreed that the upcoming negotiation would not take place in Constantinople. Instead of showing off his military power, the emperor chose to impress the Avars with a pompous ceremony full of spectacularly dressed-up court dignitaries.³ He most likely decided that the meeting should take place in Herakleia on the Marmara coast on Sunday, 5 June.⁴ Herakleios planned to organize a festive reception with chariot races and other spectacular performances. Instead of this, he almost fell into a trap. In all likelihood, the khagan had ordered selected troops to scatter into the difficult terrain and cut off the escape corridor for the emperor. Herakleios was shocked, but he managed to avoid panicking and started to gallop away to the capital.⁵

For the rest of the day and the following night, the inhabitants of Constantinople witnessed the cruel destruction of the city's suburbs.⁶ The Avar cavalry managed to reach the area of the Golden Horn, where they pillaged the sacral complex of Saints Kosmas and Damianos. Another part reached the Bosphorus and pillaged the Church of the Archangel Michael

at Promotos.⁷ Herakleios probably tried to persuade the raiders to withdraw from the suburbs by offering them money.⁸ The Avars, burdened by loot and a multitude of captives, tried to withdraw as soon as possible to safe territory across the Danube.

At the end of 623, Herakleios sent envoys to the Avars asking for peace. The khagan demanded that the tribute be increased to 200,000 solidi.⁹ This was an enormous sum, much higher than any previously agreed, even more than the Hun leader Attila had received for refraining from attacking the Roman Empire at the peak of his power.¹⁰ In addition, Herakleios had to hand over several valuable hostages to the Avars to guarantee the fulfilment of the peace treaty.¹¹

A NEW OFFENSIVE

On 25 March 624, Herakleios started a new campaign against Persia. On that day he left Constantinople, and after celebrating Easter in Nikomedia he moved with his wife Martina to Kappadokian Kaisareia, where he planned to concentrate all his available troops.¹² Herakleios then moved through the Euphrates valley to Theodosiupolis and invaded Persamenia, as his commander Philippikos had in 615 to lure the Persians away from Constantinople.¹³

Herakleios conquered Dvin and subsequently moved south-eastwards to invade the area of Atropatene, which is in today's Iranian Azerbaijan. The Persian king Khusro and his army allegedly of 40,000 men were in its main centre, Ganzak. Instead of stopping the attack, he left the town and fled to the central areas of Persia. Khusro's presence in Ganzak cannot be explained by the concentration of all available forces on the decisive attack against Herakleios.¹⁴ As we know, the shah had led his men into battle for the last time at the beginning of the conflict with Rome, where he had almost lost his life. After the fall of the fortress of Dara, he left the military leadership to his commanders and it is not likely that he would have changed this strategy. It is not clear how many men the Persians had at their disposal; the data mentioned above is not reliable and could just be propaganda. No more than two months had passed from the first reports of Herakleios reaching the Persian part of Armenia.¹⁵ If Khusro had really planned a decisive attack, then it is difficult to explain why he escaped with a still undefeated army that could have been much larger than the Roman expeditionary corps. Why would he leave this crucial religious centre and its adjacent areas to the enemy? Most importantly, Khusro apparently

began to mobilize his army after he had learned about Herakleios's offensive and not beforehand.¹⁶ The explanation for his unexpected escape was probably even more prosaic. Ganzak was the traditional summer residence of the Persian kings, and for Khusro it was also a reminder of his victory over the rebellious commander Bahram Chobin, which allowed him to finally seal his return to the royal throne in 591.¹⁷ Khusro was probably accompanied only by a small force; when he learned of the unexpected offensive by Herakleios, he had to leave and mobilize all his forces to avert the attack.

Herakleios captured the now abandoned Ganzak and then moved further eastwards; he destroyed the Temple of Adhur Gushnasp, a symbol of the sacral power of Persian kings.¹⁸ Herakleios allegedly reached Median Ekbatana, while the Persian king managed to escape to his favourite residence in Dastagerd, which was situated 100 kilometres from Ktesiphon. The Roman offensive benefited from the moment of surprise and the allocation of a significant number of Persian troops in occupied territories.¹⁹

With the coming winter, the emperor stopped pursuing the Persian king who decided to apply the traditional tactic of burning the land as he retreated. Herakleios probably lost a lot of soldiers during the tough summer offensive, and he could hardly expect to supply troops so far away from his own military bases. He decided to retreat by using a route through the territories of northeast Azerbaijan, because he had learned about the concentration of Persian forces in the Nisibis area. This path of retreat was not affected by war at that time and was able to provide enough resources.²⁰

Herakleios wanted to spend winter in the flat area of today's Azerbaijan next to the western coast of the Caspian Sea. It was a land which the ancient geographers called "Albania" and which Armenian chroniclers called "Aluank". Originally it was an independent Christian kingdom, but at this time it was a borderland of Persia. After a terrible march of more than 900 kilometres, the emperor arrived at the designated place probably at the end of November 624. In the valley of the Kura River, westwards from the centre of Albania Partaw, he built his winter camp and released many prisoners as they complicated his retreat.²¹

DIPLOMATIC SOLUTIONS

From the Persian destruction of Jerusalem in 614, a religious factor started to play a more important role in the last war of antiquity. The Persians successfully benefited from disputes between various Christian groups in

Syria and Egypt. When occupying Palestine, they could rely on sympathy as well as frequent military support from Jewish communities. On the other hand, the loss of the Holy City caused a strong response among Christians. Roman inhabitants experienced a shock, but this strengthened their identity and general will to resist. With the support of the church, Herakleios was able to convince the army and the people that the Persians were no longer traditional military and political rivals of the empire who were conducting the war according to diplomatic and political rules.

Herakleios appealed to the wider Christian fellowship and invited Albanian, Armenian, and Iberian princes to voluntarily join his army.²² He might have also used religious propaganda to recruit new allies. His army was strengthened by Lazi, Abasgi, and Iberians who traditionally had closer contacts with the imperial court than with Persia. Moreover, they were Chalcedonian Dyophysites. The idea of a united Christian bloc against godless enemies therefore had a real political and religious background.²³

Herakleios wanted to engage all enemies against Persia regardless of their confession. Sometime at the turn of 624 and 625, he sent his envoy Andrew to ensure the support of Tong, the khagan of the Western Turks (c. 616–628/629).²⁴ In ca. 614, Turkic hordes unexpectedly invaded the Iranian plateau and devastated it. The Turks apparently exploited the weakening of Persian borders to the north at the time of the culminant Persian expansion in the Levant and Asia Minor.²⁵

The Western Turks had been considered as potential allies from the times of Emperor Justinos II. However, that alliance was not successful for various reasons, including the considerable distance.²⁶ Nonetheless, at the turn of 624 and 625 Herakleios was in Caucasian Albania near the Derbent Pass, where one year later the Turks sent an answer to the emperor despite the presence of a strong Persian garrison.²⁷

Herakleios's penetration into Albania and subsequent diplomatic activities might provoke the Persian king to similarly search for allies. Of the potential candidates, only the Avars could be considered as at that time they were the only ones with a centralized power capable of threatening Constantinople itself. This threat was fully manifested in 622/623, when Herakleios temporarily had to give up the offensive against Persia and negotiate a new treaty with the Avars. Even if Persian diplomacy did not directly support the Avars in their disturbances at that time, Khusro had to know why the emperor did not attempt to continue his started offensive.

The Persians did not try to make any alliance with the Avars directly; however, they probably had information about their penetration into the Balkans. If Khusro had undertaken to persuade the Avars to terminate their treaty with the empire, he could have done so by the end of 625. Sending envoys to the Avars was a very risky attempt with unclear prospects for success. If his envoys had decided for the most passable northern route, they would have had to cross the Caucasus passes and then proceed through the Pontic steppes to the eastern borders of the Carpathians to Pannonia. The Pontic steppes had been controlled by the Turks, who were enemies of the Avars, until the 580s, and their impact could not be excluded even after this period. Similarly, it is not possible to exclude a power vacuum or the influence of the Avars in this area.²⁸

If the Persian envoys had chosen a way through Asia Minor, they would have had to pass through territories under nominal but also practical Roman control. Both routes were full of risks, but cases from the past show that alliances could be concluded even remotely through emissaries who were moving in enemy territory.²⁹ A classic example of such successful diplomacy is the mission of the Gothic king Gelimer in 538 which encouraged the Persian king Khusro I to breach the eternal peace with the Eastern Roman Empire.³⁰ It is remarkable that Gothic envoys were able to cross Roman territory without any notice. This is because Gelimer persuaded two Latin-speaking priests from Liguria to undertake this mission, and he offered them a large sum of money. On their way, these men were supported by a companion from Thrace who acted as an interpreter for the Greek and Syriac languages.

THE PERSIAN RESPONSE

The unexpected invasion of Herakleios to Persia in 624 could not be left without a response. However, it took Khusro some time to mobilize adequate forces. He initially mobilized a “new army” led by Shahrplakan, the governor of Persarmenia, to protect the passes in order to prevent a possible Roman attack in Atropatene.³¹ Shahrplakan apparently waited for the arrival of the elite part of Shahrbaraz’s forces, which in the meantime had moved into Albania via central Armenia.³² According to Theophanes, Shahrbaraz was engaged in military operations in Asia Minor during Herakleios’s summer offensive, but this information is too vague and is not confirmed by any other source.³³ Initially, Shahrbaraz had to mobilize

his forces in the occupied territories of Syria and Palestine, where he also left some of his men to ensure the security of these territories.³⁴

Herakleios decided to spend winter near the Albanian capital of Partaw. Shahrplakan's "new army" camped next to him in the south, while Shahrbaraz's forces took up a strategic position northwest of the Roman camp. If Herakleios had fulfilled his plan to use the northern route, Shahrbaraz would have attacked him directly from the rear.³⁵ The emperor was blocked by two Persian armies, but he managed to finally get through, probably at the end of December 624.³⁶ Due to a quite late winter, he chose the easiest south-eastern route through today's Agdam and Stepanakert to Nakhichevan.³⁷ The emperor caused losses to Shahrplakan and Shahrbaraz and finally repulsed the attack of the Shahen.³⁸

The remains of the Persian units regrouped and continued in pursuit. However, Herakleios managed to cross the Araxes River next to the town of Vrnjunik and thus get free from his enemies. It is probable that his allies, the Lazi and Abasgi, left him here because they wanted to return to their own territories.³⁹ Shahrbaraz and Shahen decided to take advantage of this weakness, and they attacked Herakleios's army again but without success.⁴⁰ The Persians assumed that Herakleios had then decided to return home by using the route to Theodosiupolis, and so they temporarily stopped their pursuit. Shahrbaraz moved to the north edge of Lake Van. In the adjacent region of Alovit, Shahrbaraz put his army into winter camp, setting up his headquarters in the fortress of Archesh together with 6000 men. However, Herakleios unexpectedly attacked the dispersed Persians at the end of February, and he sacked and burned Archesh. Shahrbaraz escaped, but he left behind two wives and a rich booty in the fortress.⁴¹

On 1 March 625, Herakleios gathered his army and arranged a meeting where he decided to return to his own territory.⁴² Sometime in the middle of March, he crossed the passes in Armenian Taurus and reached the fortress of Amida, situated on the right bank of the Tigris River. From there he sent letters to Constantinople informing about his successes. In the meantime, Shahrbaraz gathered his dissipated military forces and continued in pursuit. Herakleios escaped to the southwest and moved through Samosata and Germanikeia before finally arriving in Adana. Shahrbaraz tried to stop him once again near the crossing of the Saros (Seyhan) River.⁴³

The emperor then continued northwards without any problems and reached Sebasteia in April 625 after crossing the Halys River. The Eastern Roman army remained undefeated, but it was exhausted by the long win-

ter march. The Persians suffered great losses during the pursuit, but they had achieved their goal: they had expelled the enemy from their territory and prevented further plundering.⁴⁴ Herakleios needed fresh men and allies, but so did his opponent. There was probably no open military action until the beginning of the next year.

THE GENERAL OFFENSIVE

In the spring of 626, the decisive phase of the last great war of antiquity began. The Persian commanders were not able to destroy Herakleios's army despite their superiority. The tactical and personal failures had to be even more irritating to the already impatient Persian king, who expected a trophy of victory. Khusro had already decided to build several monuments throughout Persia to commemorate his triumphs.⁴⁵ In order to speed up this goal, he wished to finish the whole conflict with one huge offensive in Asia Minor. The king ordered the mobilization of all the available men of his kingdom, and he also called the civilian population and slaves to arms. Fresh forces were strengthened by elite corps known as the Golden Spearmen. These were reportedly 50,000 men strong, a highly exaggerated number, but their military strength and capability cannot be underestimated.⁴⁶ Khusro took them from Shahrbaraz, but the reasons for this step remain unclear. By this act, either the Persian king was expressing his dissatisfaction with Shahrbaraz's conduct when expelling Herakleios from Persia in 625 or he just wanted to strengthen the seasoned troops in Shahan's army. Also, the main strategic goals of this offensive are not very clear. The first option is that both armies had to reach the Bosphorus and attack Constantinople together with the Avars. In this case, Khusro and his subordinated commanders had to bear in mind the almost insuperable logistical obstacles resulting from the absence of a fleet to ensure the transportation of men and equipment across the strait. The second possibility was to draw Herakleios to Constantinople to face an invasion by Shahrbaraz and then encircle him in cooperation with the second army of Shahan.⁴⁷ But the penetration of Shahrbaraz to Bosphorus could only be meant as a diversion, whereas the main strategic task of the Persian king was in fact the destruction of the Roman field army of Herakleios with reinforced units of Shahan's army.

At the beginning of spring at the latest, Shahrbaraz started his campaign leading to the Bosphorus. He probably followed the upper part of the Tigris River through northern Syria and Kilikia.⁴⁸ The second army of

Shahen penetrated the Roman territory from the north possibly through Theodosiopolis and Satala.⁴⁹ Herakleios spent the rest of 625 near Sebasteia.⁵⁰ In the spring of the following year, he moved north-eastwards to the Pontic coast where he made contact with Turkic envoys who replied to his previous diplomatic mission led by Andrew.⁵¹ There is no doubt that the emperor planned a joint attack with the Turks in the Southern Caucasus which, however, was disrupted by the general Persian offensive. Some days before the end of June, Shahrbaraz had reached the western edge of Asia Minor. There was only the Bosphorus and Constantinople in front of them.⁵² Shahrbaraz chose a wait-and-see tactic and burned the suburbs of Chalcedon and perhaps the town itself.

However, the second Persian army led by Shahen was utterly destroyed by the Roman force, probably near the town of Euchaita in the region of Pontos in the northern part of Asia Minor.⁵³ Although this was probably a key battle of the whole war, neither the exact date nor any details are known of this fight. It seems that two separate divisions of the Roman army led by Herakleios's brother Theodore and possibly also by the emperor himself unexpectedly attacked the Persians.⁵⁴ Moreover, it is not clear whether Shahen died there or just fell into the disgrace of the Persian king.⁵⁵ Probably only after this triumph, Herakleios ensured the naval connection with Constantinople via the Black Sea. He sent written instructions there and some reinforcements.⁵⁶ At the same time, he further announced the arrival of the rescuing army led by his brother Theodore.⁵⁷

THE ATTACK ON THE QUEEN OF THE CITIES

Shahrbaraz did not reach Constantinople alone. A little bit later, a large army of Avars and their allies came to the vicinity of that city. Was this just a coincidence or a prepared and planned action?⁵⁸ Preserved sources suggest the latter, although none of these contains any details of its diplomatic background. According to the badly preserved official report, Shahrbaraz waited for arrival of the Avar khagan. No further explanation is given by its author except for his statement that the Persian–Avar alliance was finally revealed by “deeds”, that is, by the subsequent course of military actions against Constantinople.⁵⁹ Another contemporary witness, Theodore Synkellos, gives even less information. He interprets the whole attack allegorically as a rebellion provoked by the Chaldeans and Assyrians, who were assisted by a barbarian dog (the Avar khagan) against the New Jerusalem (Constantinople).⁶⁰ In his sermon, Synkellos states that the kha-

gan started military preparations for the conquest of the city immediately after he had learned that the emperor had left the city to wage war with Persia.⁶¹ But this would literally mean that the Avars had started with their military preparations in 624, when the emperor went on his second expedition against Persia. This scenario is unlikely because the Avars had to focus on their activities against rebellious Slavs in Pannonia. Synkellos's interpretation of the primary causes of the Avar attack represents a typical biblical scheme, where barbarian nations are only a tool of God who punishes the variety and diversity of Christian sins. Synkellos also apparently knew nothing about the background of the siege. According to him, the main cause for the siege was the greediness of the Avar khagan.⁶²

Even the third contemporary witness, the poet George of Pisidia, does not clarify this situation. He speaks about a complicated and tangled war: "Because Slav with Hun and Scythian with Bulgarian, and Mede with Scythian joined together, different in languages and settlements, but at the same time far from each other, helping at distance, they fight against us in one war."⁶³ The poet says that despite the great distance and variety of languages, the abovementioned nations helped each other to fight their common enemy. He would likely to stress that they coordinated their actions, but he did not need to explain the background of such alliance.

The later Byzantine chronicler Theophanes states that the Persian king sent Shahrbaraz to Constantinople to establish "an alliance between the western Huns (Avars) and the Bulgars, Slavs, and Gepids".⁶⁴ That invitation could only be addressed to the Avar khagan who was the only military leader capable of organizing such a heterogeneous army. According to Theophanes, Shahrbaraz had to secure the involvement of the Avars and others in the planned joint military action as their ally.

Another Byzantine author, the patriarch Nikephoros, said that the Avars broke the peace and entered into an agreement with the Persians: "Dividing, as it were, between themselves the Thracian Bosphorus, the Persians destroyed the Asiatic part (of it), while the Avars devastated the Thracian regions. Giving word to each other, the Avars agreed to capture Byzantium."⁶⁵ This could be interpreted in such a way that Constantinople would be destroyed only by the Avars based on the common agreement while the Persians would remain in the Asian part of the empire.

Regardless of such vague statements, the attack on Constantinople was probably not just the result of the Avars' aggressive policies. Undoubtedly, the Persians had a reason to drag the Western enemies of the empire into

this conflict. Zemarchos's mission to the Turks (569–571) as well as Gelimer's embassy to the Persians (538) proves the fact that diplomatic contacts could be conducted secretly through the territories of the enemy.⁶⁶

Were the Persians really interested in participating directly in the siege of Constantinople? Apparently not, because otherwise they would have organized the naval forces in the ports in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea under their control. The passivity of Shahrbaraz would thus confirm the symbolic division of the Eastern Roman Empire between the Persians and Avars mentioned by later Byzantine chroniclers.⁶⁷ The Persians did not have a fleet to engage in the siege of Constantinople directly. Neither they could quickly seize small fishing boats, as during their attack on Egyptian Alexandria in 619.⁶⁸ It is hard to imagine that there were any available ships on the Asian coast in 626. Even if the Persians had them, they would have had to first undergo an uneven sea battle with the Constantinopolitan defences protecting the strait.

The main military force in the Balkans were the Avars. The penetration of Shahen's army in 615 to Constantinople was followed by a large Slav (or possibly Avar) attack against the key cities of Eastern Illyricum. In this case, it was maybe just a coincidence. But can we say the same about the circumstances for which Herakleios stopped his military activities in 622? After many years, the emperor achieved his first victory over the Persians, but he had to return to Constantinople to appease the Avars. He spent most of the following year in unsuccessful negotiations with their khagan during which he almost lost his life. The Persians made full use of it, and they continued with their military operations in Asia Minor. Around this time, they conquered Ancyra, gaining control over the most important route connecting Constantinople with the East.⁶⁹

Khusro had a great interest in stopping further attacks of the Roman army. Even the Avars might have worried about the result of this long war. If the Eastern Roman Empire lost it and ceased to exist, there would have been no one left to pay them. However, in case of the Roman victory, the Avars faced the risk that Herakleios would decide to end their military and political hegemony in the Balkans. At that time, the Avars were weakened after their recent struggles with rebels of mixed Avaro-Slavic origin.⁷⁰ It is not excluded that the initial riot occurred already during the summer of 623 when the Avar khagan was still in Thrace with the core of his army.⁷¹ The arrival of the Frankish merchant Samo, who became the leader of this riot, might suggest a direct Frankish involvement.⁷² On the other hand, such an action would not have had direct support from Roman diplomacy,

if Herakleios had wanted to maintain the fragile peace with the Avars. After their return from Thrace in 623, the Avars had to concentrate their forces to fight the rebels.⁷³ Meanwhile in the remote areas of the khaganate, the rebelling Slavs created new political formations, their centre being represented by “Samo’s empire”. This new constellation came into being relatively swiftly, at the latest by the end of 625. The defeats that the rebels inflicted upon the Avars shook the position of their khagan.⁷⁴ If the younger son of Khagan Bayan wanted to maintain prestige, he had to come up with a new spectacular operation.⁷⁵ Therefore, the offer of the Persians for an attack on Constantinople might have looked like an attractive proposal for him. Maybe the Persian envoys and his own spies persuaded him that Constantinople was not sufficiently prepared for a siege, particularly when it could not rely on the presence of its emperor or most of his army. Only with a magnificent military action could the Avar leader unify the more independent Slavs and strengthen his authority over other nomadic groups within the khaganate. Somehow, he had to justify breaching the agreements. That Herakleios ceased to pay the Avars is unlikely because the flow of the Roman gold coins culminated in Pannonia in 625.⁷⁶ The emperor certainly needed to protect Thrace with the capital and maintain peace with the old enemy. Further, he would not ask the khagan to become the symbolic protector of his children before starting on his new offensive against the Persians.⁷⁷ Therefore, it cannot be excluded that the khagan initially demanded a higher tribute at the beginning of his spectacular expedition against Constantinople. At the same time, he also could accuse the Romans for their allegedly support of revolt led by Samo in Pannonia.⁷⁸ However, he and his followers certainly did not want to occupy the city or establish there the new centre of power. They rushed to the Bosphorus only for the chance of booty and their own fame.

NOTES

1. George of Pisidia *Expeditio Persica* 3, v. 311–312, 128, 130. Hurbanič 2011, 316–317.
2. The traces of this invasion can only be found in the chronicle by Theophanes (301.25), who mistakenly places this incident in 617/618, but his possible source suggests a connection between the Avar invasion of Thrace and accelerating negotiations with Herakleios that resulted in an agreement to meet at Herakleia.

3. *Chronicon Paschale*, 712.12–16; Nikephoros, 10, 50.13–15.
4. On this incident in general: Baynes 1912, 110–128; Stratos 1968, 154–160; Stratos 1981, 115–118; Pohl 1988, 245–248, and Hurbanič 2011, 315–328.
5. Nikephoros, 10, 50.24–27–52.28–30; Theophanes, 301.31–302.1.
6. *Chronicon Paschale*, 712.21; Nikephoros, 10, 50.30–32.
7. *Chronicon Paschale*, 713.9–13.
8. Theodore Synkellos, 301.38–39 and *Continuatio Havniensis*, 329.
9. Nikephoros, 13, 58.1–4.
10. Priskos, 9.3, 236.1–10. For such demands by the Avars: Pohl 1988, 209–215; Hardt 2003, 98–107.
11. Nikephoros, 13, 58.4–9.
12. *Chronicon Paschale*, 713.15–714.8; Theophanes, 306.19–27; Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 80–81 Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 213–214. For the debate about the exact date: Gerland 1894, 331–333 and 348–355; Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 204–205 and Howard-Johnston 1999, 16, n. 53.
13. Gerland 1894 351; Manandyan 1950, 135–136.
14. Howard-Johnston 2008, 81, 83 and 2010a, 442–443.
15. Gerland 1894, 352.
16. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.10, 79.
17. Riedlberger 1998, 172–173.
18. Theophanes, 308.7–9; Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 81; Thomas Artsruni, 159; Nikephoros, 12, 56.43–49; George Kedrenos, 721.18–722.5. Cf. Howard-Johnston 1999, 17. On the localization of this temple: Schippmann 1971, 309–357.
19. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.10, 79.
20. Theophanes, 308.12–25.
21. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.10, 79–81; Howard-Johnston 1999, 17.
22. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.10, 80–81.
23. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.10, 79–80.
24. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.12, 87. Howard-Johnston 1999, 23. Most relevant sources identify these invaders as the Turks and not the Khazars. Zuckerman 2007, 411. Ludwig 1982, 348–355, Zuckerman (2007, 413) dated this embassy to the beginning of 625.
25. Ps.-Sebeos, 28, 51. Howard-Johnston 2008, 184. Howard-Johnston 2010b, 63–64.
26. On this embassy: Dobrovits 2011, 373–409 and Haussig 1972, 233–238.
27. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.12, 87.
28. Pohl 1988, 273. Szádeczky-Kardoss (2000, 314) was convinced that the Avars had finally managed to gain control of the Pontic steppes at the

- beginning of the seventh century, which enabled them to establish contact with the Persians and reach an agreement to attack Constantinople.
29. Szádeczky-Kardoss (2000, 314) completely excludes the idea that the Persian envoys reached Avaria through Roman territory.
 30. Prokopios *Bella*, 2.2, 151–153 and 6.2, 249–250.
 31. Theophanes, 308.27–309.9. On this military commander, cf. Dowsett 1951, 311–321.
 32. Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 81; Movses Dasxuranci, 2.10, 79.
 33. Theophanes (306.21–28) only stated that Khusro dispatched Shahrbaraz to invade Roman territory but immediately called him back after Herakleios's invasion of Armenia. Theophanes's statement was accepted as genuine by Zuckerman (2002, 190).
 34. Ps.-Sebeos (38, 81) clearly asserts that Khusro had only a small army at his disposal. Both he and Movses Dasxuranci (2.10, 79) added that Shahrbaraz came back to Armenia from the Roman (Greek) territories. This does not necessarily mean that the Persians conducted a new offensive at the time of Herakleios's campaign in Armenia. Movses (2.10, 79) made it plain that Shahrbaraz came from the occupied Roman territories, leaving at least a part of his army to hold the positions during his absence. Manandyan (1950, 138) also concludes that the Persian commander came from Syria.
 35. Zuckerman 2002, 191.
 36. Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 82. Cf. Zuckerman 2002, 191; Manandyan 1950, 140.
 37. Seibt 2007, 592–594; already by Manandyan 1950, 140 with map.
 38. Theophanes, 310.14–16; Howard-Johnston 1999, 18. Sahraplakn was perhaps only wounded as he seems to re-emerge during Herakleios's campaign in Armenia in 627. Cf. Dowsett 1951, 317.
 39. Theophanes, 310.21–23; Zuckerman 2002, 192.
 40. Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 82; Zuckerman 2002, 197.
 41. Theophanes, 310.23–312.7; Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 82–83; Manandyan 1950, 143. Zuckerman 2002, 194.
 42. Theophanes, 312.19–26. Cf. Manandyan 1950, 144; Stratos 1968, 166–167 and 367, n. 21.
 43. Theophanes, 312.26–314.21; George of Pisidia, *Heraclias* 3, frg. 18, 228.
 44. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.10, 81.
 45. Howard-Johnston 2004, 94.
 46. Theophanes, 315.5–6. There is no other mention of this Persian unit. Perhaps it could belong to the elite corps of the Persian army labelled as “immortals” by Roman authors. However, as Charles has recently shown (2011, 289–313), there is no proof of such a name in the Persian sources.
 47. Howard-Johnston 1995, 133.
 48. Howard-Johnston 2004, 94.
 49. Howard-Johnston 1995, 131, and 2004, 94.

50. Probably at Bathys Rhyax as Brown, Bryer, and Winfield have argued (1978, 19, 21).
51. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.12, 87. This meeting probably did take place in Sourmaina and not Trebizond as later sources suggest. Cf. Brown, Bryer, and Winfield 1978, 30. This alliance can be established already prior to the Avar siege, judging from the vague mention of recently established alliance of Herakleios by George of Pisidia (*In Bonum Patricium* v. 133–134, 150). Cf. also Pertusi 1956, 172.
52. *Chronicon Paschale*, 716.17–717.5. Howard-Johnston 1995, 132.
53. Cf. Zuckerman 1988, 206, corrected by Howard-Johnston (1995, 134, n. 11); also, Zuckerman 2007, 414 and n. 39.
54. Theophanes, 315.16–22 *Vita et Miracula Theodori (tironis)*, 195–196.
55. Cf. Theophanes, 315.23–26 and Al-Tabari, 322.
56. Theophanes, 315.11–15; George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 280–281, 174. Discussion by Stratos 1967, 373; Tsangadas 1980, 83; Speck 1980 44–47; Van Dieten 1985, 173–175; Pohl 1988, 249; Howard-Johnston 1995, 134, n. 10.
57. The members of the regency council of Constantinople already knew of the arrival of this army during the Avar siege. Cf. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.1–4.
58. Cf. comments by Pernice 1905, 139; Pertusi 1959, 207, Lemerle 1954, 296–297; Tsangadas 1980, 101, 257, n. 143; Chichurov 1980, 98; Pohl 1988, 249; Howard-Johnston 1995, 131; Kaegi 2003, 134. For a more sceptical point of view: Barišić 1954, 390–391; Waldmüller 1976, 276; Ivanov (1995, 80, n. 2) concluded that the initiator of this alliance and that of the subsequent attack on Constantinople was the Avar khagan. On the contrary, Stratos (1968, 179–189) argued that it could have been the Persians who encouraged the Avars to attack by offering gifts and gold.
59. *Chronicon Paschale*, 716.17–21–717.1.
60. Theodore Synkellos, 300.13–301.9.
61. Theodore Synkellos, 302.19–25.
62. Theodore Synkellos, 301.14.
63. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 197–206, 168.
64. Theophanes, 315.8–11.
65. Nikephoros, 13, 58.11–15.
66. Szádeczky-Kardoss 2000, 314–315.
67. Howard-Johnston 1995, 133.
68. *Khuzistan Chronicle*, 54.
69. All sources went back to the lost archetype and unfortunately cannot be precisely dated: *Chronicon AD 1234*, 96, 180; Michael the Syrian, 11.3, 408; Theophanes, 302.22–23; Agapios, 451. On this conquest: Foss 1975, 725, 738 and 1977, 44–45. The Persians probably attacked also Rhodos at this time, cf. *Chronicon AD 724*, 113.

70. Ps.-Fredegar, 4.48, 206, 208. Cf. recently Hurbanič 2011, 325–228, and Kardaras 2018, 79–82.
71. Hurbanič 211, 325. S. Szádeczky-Kardoss (1991, 181–182) point out that the fortieth year of Chlothar’s reign mentioned by Ps.-Fredegar covers most of 624 and not 623; therefore, he suggests that the revolt started in the autumn of 623 at the earliest.
72. Polek 2007, 180–181.
73. Ps.-Fredegar, 4.48, 210.
74. Steinhübel 2004, 31–32.
75. Pohl 1988, 248.
76. Somogyi 2008, 96–100 (Fig. 1–5).
77. Theodore Synkellos, 302.13–15.
78. Stratos 1967, 371, and 1968, 178–179.

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The Army of Besiegers

In the spring of 626, the Avars mobilized the largest military force in their history.¹ An essential precondition for their success consisted in securing sufficient fodder for their numerous herds of horses and beasts of burden. The necessity of substantial amounts of horse fodder was also highlighted as a disadvantage for the Avars by the Strategikon of Maurikios.² The Avars and their numerous allies probably opted for the most comfortable way to Constantinople, one they had used during their previous invasions. They probably followed along the Morava and Danube River valleys and then crossed one of the lower eastern passes of Stara Planina and continued southwards along the road to Markianopolis and Anchialos. From there the Avar army could follow the western route and then turn southwards down to Adrianople.³ The khagan arrived here by the end of June at the latest and stayed approximately for one month gathering supplies and organizing the train and transportation of wooden components for the construction of siege engines (Fig. 6.1).⁴

THE STRUCTURE OF THE AVAR ARMY

The Avar khagan had an unprecedented multitude under his command. Its core and most valued part was formed by the elite Avar cavalry of the khaganate.⁵ Its overall organization was most likely based on the traditional nomadic decimal system where the smallest units of the army were

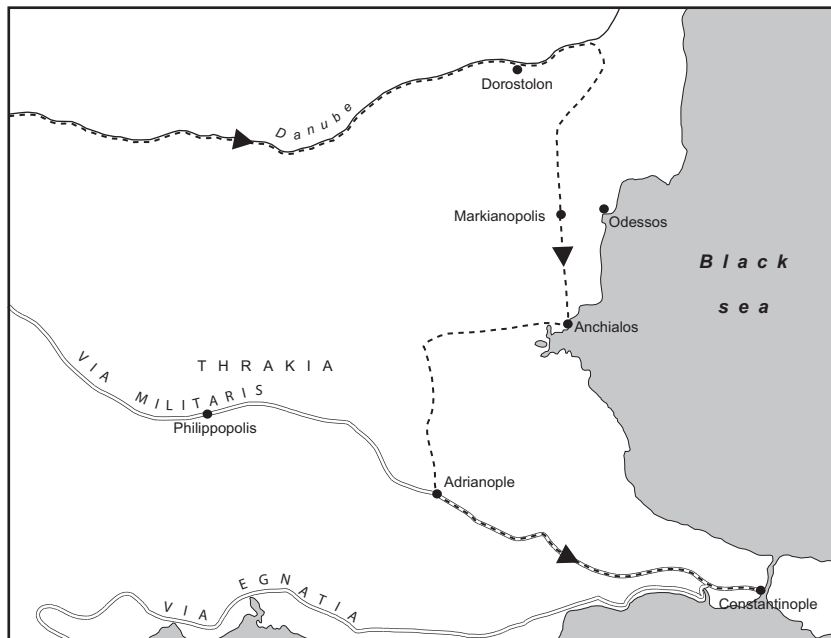


Fig. 6.1 A possible route of the Avar army to Constantinople in 626; map by Ivan Varšo

formed by groups of 10 warriors, while the largest ones, called *tumen*, consisted of 10,000.⁶ The topmost positions were reserved for the clans and tribes that were closest to the khagan. The rest of the nomadic tribes, especially those who joined the Avars later on, were in a lower position.⁷ Although the Avars considered them to be allies, they were still perceived as second-class warriors. The third category was formed by what is often referred to as “the subdued people”, including the Slavs, as well as the remnants of Gepids and Lombards who had stayed in Pannonia after 568.⁸ Of course, such a classification is schematic and probably did not fully reflect the actual situation, thus making it possible that several important German and maybe even Slavic chieftains with their cavalry entourages enjoyed a higher rank within the overall hierarchy.

Similarly, as it was during the previous campaigns, the core of the khagan’s army consisted of heavy cavalry.⁹ Its armour and armament can be typologically classified as Central Asian and Persian.¹⁰ The Avar heavy

cavalrymen were not a unified body, but rather an internally segmented group with a hierarchy of military ranks.¹¹ According to the *Strategikon* of Maurikios, the Avars were “armed with mail, swords, bows, and lances (κουτάρια). In combat most of them attack doubly armed; lances slung over their shoulders and holding bows in their hands, they make use of both as need requires. Not only do they wear armour themselves, but in addition the horses of their illustrious men are covered in front with iron or felt. They give special attention to training in archery on horseback.”¹²

The text clearly shows that under the term “the Avar army” its anonymous author primarily meant the heavy cavalry, which is an indirect confirmation of its importance within the military structure of the khaganate. By mentioning their armament, he uses the word ζάβα, a vague term with a diverse meaning,¹³ which in this context is mainly identified with a coat of mail or mail/lamellar cuirass, respectively.¹⁴ Unfortunately, no further explanation of this term is given by the author of the *Strategikon* in his description of the armaments of the Avar army. The use of chain mail and lamellar armour by the Avars in that period is proven archaeologically, but in most cases only in the form of small fragments.¹⁵

During the very first day of the siege, it was probably this force which caught the attention of the citizens of Constantinople the most. Theodore Synkellos mentions that they were “all clad in armours, heads covered with helmets, carrying various weapons”.¹⁶ According to the preserved archaeological material, the main weapons of the Avar cavalry in that period consisted of long thrusting lances,¹⁷ long double- or single-edged swords,¹⁸ axes,¹⁹ and composite reflex bows. Compared with a common bow with a range of approximately 80 metres, the reflex one could hit a target from 400 to 500 metres. Using stirrups, a rider in full gallop could shoot as many as twenty arrows per minute frontwards or backwards.²⁰ During the Avar siege, the heavy cavalry was positioned close to its leader. On the eighth day (Tuesday, 5 August), the khagan galloped away “with all his selected cavalrymen clad in armour” and showed himself to the Persian troops standing on the opposite side of the Bosphorus.²¹ These “cavalrymen clad in armour” were also seen near the khagan during the final day of the siege.²² The elite heavy cavalry is estimated to have numbered 1000 to 3000 warriors, and due to overall armament costs it constituted only a small part of the Avar army.²³ The majority of the Avars consisted of light cavalry.²⁴ In general, the armaments of the light cavalrymen consisted of similar weapons as those of the heavy cavalry. The stress was probably predominantly on speed and agility together with excellent horseback archery skills.²⁵

THE SLAVS

The Slavs formed an important and maybe even the decisive part of the army that besieged Constantinople. Despite their large numbers, they belonged to auxiliary units that were entrusted with the most dangerous tasks. Some of them formed the first line of the Avar army.²⁶ Some Slavs were positioned in front of the remaining sections of the Theodosian Walls,²⁷ while others carried out naval operations in the Golden Horn. Probably most of them belonged to the light infantry, armed with short javelins and bows; according to the *Strategikon* of Maurikios, some of Slavic warriors were protected by large but unwieldy shields.²⁸ Such a description is basically in accordance with other sources and, as such, it can be also supported by the archaeological findings of remnants of such weapons.²⁹ Sources from the sixth century (Prokopios of Kaisareia and Theophylaktos Simokattes) also mention Slavic cavalry units.³⁰ The possibility of the existence of a special category of Slavic cavalry consisting of mounted archers with protective armour has been recently postulated.³¹ Although the existence of such groups cannot be totally excluded, the Avar khagan mainly relied on siege and naval skills of the Slavs which probably carried out most operations during the attack.

We do not have much information about the origin of the Slavs fighting in the Avar army, nor do we know whether they participated in the campaign voluntarily or not.³² Undoubtedly, the military strength of the Avars, and especially the spatial factor, could have had a decisive impact on the Slavs. Tributes were undoubtedly the main form of dependence. However, in the case of the Lower Danube Slavs, this relationship could be rather characterized as an oscillation between common and competing interests.³³

It is assumed that the Slavs in the Avar army could have come from various regions. First, they may have come from Pannonia, where the centre of the Avar khaganate was established. In this case they were the direct subjects of the Avars. However, the existence of a large number of Slavs in Pannonia is archaeologically rather difficult to prove.³⁴ Even if we admitted that the Slavs gradually adopted the Avar identity, we cannot correlate such a claim with accounts written by contemporary and later Greek authors, who clearly identified the Slavs in the Avar army by their type of armament and clothing.³⁵ During the siege of 626, the Avars probably relied on Slavs from less central parts of the khaganate, since its southern and eastern border zones show certain evidence of Slavic settlement from

this period. The Slavs, together with various other warriors, probably formed a buffer zone and had their own political structures. Written sources clearly show that in the late sixth century, the Slavs became an important part of the Avar army.³⁶

The participation of the Lower Danube Slavs in the siege is a complicated issue. Although the region of the present Wallachian lowland between the mountain range of the Transylvanian Alps and the Danube River was one of the areas of interest for the Avars, the relations between the local Slavs and the khaganate, as well as with the Eastern Roman Empire, remained rather ambivalent during the sixth century. Despite their strong efforts, the Avars did not manage to bring these Slavs under their long-term rule.³⁷ The khaganate only considered this region as its area of influence or a possible source of loot.³⁸ Exposed to constant Avar and Roman pressure, the Slavs started to flee this region and migrate to the inland Balkans, especially in the early era of the reign of Emperor Herakleios.³⁹ Their presence in the campaign against Constantinople cannot be excluded. The sources partially suggest various political statuses of Slavic warriors within the khagan's army; therefore, it is possible that some of them joined the campaign voluntarily.⁴⁰ It is known that during the siege, the less important parts of the city walls were attacked by purely Slavic units, which suggests that they fought under the command of their own chieftains. In the central area of the attack, the Slavs formed the first line and possibly also the second.⁴¹ The roughly contemporary Chronicle of Ps.-Fredegar labelled the Slavs as "befulci".⁴² The advocates of the Latin origin of this term (bubulcus—herdsman) maintain that the "befulci" were individuals who took care of the herds during the Avar raids (befulci = byvolci, "byvol"—buffalo in Slavic languages, i.e., people responsible for the Avar supply train). According to this, Ps.-Fredegar used a dialect form (bifulcus) which supposedly had its origin in the region of Umbria in Italy.⁴³ Others claimed that it is rather a compound (bi(s) + folc), meaning a double people, and as such is related to the military sphere by means of their interpretation of another term used by Ps.-Fredegar—vestila (vexilla = banner/a company of troops). The term "befulci" may have therefore denominated two military units of Slavs.⁴⁴ The advocates of a German origin (Beifolk) understood it as "auxiliary people" or "auxiliary army", or as a later form of the Old German expression "fulcfree" mentioned in the edict by the Lombard king Rotharius.⁴⁵ Despite a variety of opinions, it is very probable that the chronicler wanted to stress the status of the Slavs as subjects and their lower rank within the structure of the Avar army.

Regardless of whether the Slavs and others participated in this campaign voluntarily, they all had to follow the orders of the khagan, who was the only person who bore responsibility for the result of the siege.

THE OTHER ALLIES

The Bulgar troops formed the third most important segment of the Avar army. George of Pisidia explicitly mentions them on two occasions: when listing various groups participating in the siege and when describing the final attack of the Slavic monoxyles, since the Bulgars formed part of their crews.⁴⁶ They are also listed among other participants in the siege by the later *Chronographia* of Theophanes.⁴⁷

The status of the Bulgars in the Avar army during the siege of 626 is as problematic as it is in the case of the Slavs.⁴⁸ After the arrival of the Avars, there was a lack of reports confirming the participation of the Bulgars in their military campaigns; therefore, it cannot be exactly suggested when and under what circumstances they became a part of the Avar army. The nomad “ethnonyms” were often only umbrella terms for various and largely heterogeneous nomadic groups. We also need to bear in mind the flexibility of the ethnogenesis of various nomad tribes and their frequent regrouping and subsequent splitting. This was probably also the case of the warriors who referred to themselves as Bulgars. The tradition and frequency of the use of this term could have inspired other nomads living in the khaganate to adopt the Bulgar identity, although obviously only in a political sense rather than an ethnic one.⁴⁹

The Bulgars appear in preserved sources as the allies of the Avars as late as in the last decade of the sixth century.⁵⁰ Their significance in the Avar army particularly increased during the final confrontation with the empire, and it is probable that the Bulgar troops had joined the Avars in the great offensive against the Eastern Roman Empire that took place sometime between 614 and 618. This offensive included a thirty-day siege of Thessalonica, which took place on the initiative of the independently operating Slavs. The participation of the Bulgars is emphasized in the siege of the city.⁵¹ The Bulgars also remained a stable part of the khagan’s army during the siege of Constantinople and their participation was certainly not negligible. Besides their important role during the sieges of Thessalonica and Constantinople, the Bulgars became so strong that several years later they even aspired to assume the leading role in the entire khaganate, albeit unsuccessfully. Among the 9000 Bulgars who were

subsequently forced to leave Pannonia, there were probably many who had participated in the siege of Constantinople together with the Avars.⁵²

The Avars could also use remnants of the Germanic population of the khaganate. Among them, the Gepids were directly mentioned in the late source of Theophanes, but only as a possible ally of the Avar khagan.⁵³ The Gepids and other Germans as well could participate in the Avar siege, albeit not in very large numbers, otherwise their presence would probably not have escaped the attention of contemporary authors. The question of Gepid continuity in their homeland after 567 is still a matter of discussion.⁵⁴ Despite the reference of Theophylaktos Simokattes, who mentions the existence of three Gepid villages by the Tisza River, no such continuity can be proven from the archaeological point of view.⁵⁵ On the other hand, the preserved material in graves discovered in south-eastern Pannonia (Transdanubia) is now treated in more general terms as the product of a local Germanic population which maintained strong ties to the Merovingian cultural area.⁵⁶ They do not preserve the signs of continuity with traditional Gepid material culture prior to the Avar conquest. According to the archaeological evidence, their panoply consisted of swords (*spathae*), shield bosses, different types of spears, and barded arrowheads.⁵⁷ Could this wealthy local German aristocracy be labelled as “Gepid” in accordance with contemporary Greek sources? Did this social group engage in the Avar siege with these weapons? Such questions cannot be solved given the present state of written sources and archaeological material.

Unlike the Slavs, Bulgars, and Germans, the Persians represented the only true and equal ally of the Avar khagan. The army of Shahrbaraz constituted a solid and experienced force which probably consisted of up to 15,000 soldiers. The military target of this unit can only be guessed at, but in all probability it was dispatched to prevent further Roman military expeditions to the Sasanian heartlands in coordination with the strengthened army of Shahen. After their arrival at the Bosphorus, Shahrbaraz and his men could not interfere in the siege directly because of the lack of ships. They probably could not make use of local vessels either because they had either been destroyed or taken to the other side of the strait by the defenders of the capital. The core of Shahrbaraz’s army was probably heavy cavalry protected with mail armour with their main weapons being long spears and swords or axes.⁵⁸ It is also possible that siege specialists were present in their ranks to assist the Avars. Overall, the participation of Shahrbaraz’s army in the siege rather suggests a limited role resulting from the different strategical aims of the Persians and Avars.

SIEGE MACHINES

Contemporary sources of the Avar siege explicitly mention protective shields (*chelonai*), siege towers, and catapults.⁵⁹ During this attack, the Avars built siege engines right on the spot from the material brought on wagons. Some of the parts were prepared beforehand and loaded on the wagons, others material came from destroyed houses in the outskirts of Constantinople.⁶⁰ The Avars used buffaloes and probably also Bactrian camels, as they had in the earlier siege of Thessalonica.⁶¹

An important part of the Avar siege weapons formed the protective mobile shields or shelters, known in the Greek sources as *χελῶναι*—*testudos*.⁶² Earlier Latin authors such as Flavius Vegetius used this term to describe protective covers built from timbers and planks covered with the hides of freshly slaughtered animals.⁶³ A similar device—known as a *σπᾶλίων*—was described in the first half of the sixth century by the Greek historian Agathias. According to him, it was a roofed structure made of braided reeds and covered with fresh hides. Agathias mentions that these covers were used by the soldiers to safely approach the walls and subsequently undermine them and damage their foundations.⁶⁴ A similar description can be found in the Byzantine lexicon Suidas which refers to a partially preserved work by Menander Protector. He describes these shelters using the same term—*spalion*; however, he adds that they were made from ox hides which were pulled over beams up to the height of a grown-up man.⁶⁵

The protective shelters described by Agathias and Menander strongly resemble the structures used by the Avars and Slavs during the sieges of Thessalonica in the sixth and seventh centuries. A contemporary author mentions “wickerwork structures” covered with the hides of freshly killed bulls and camels.⁶⁶ During the attack of Thessalonica in 618, the defenders often managed to lift the shelters of the attackers, using long sticks ending with ploughshare-shaped edges. Such a procedure suggests that the protective shields were built from light wickerwork materials.⁶⁷ The author of this report explicitly states that they were *testudos*, constructed from “wickerwork and skins”.⁶⁸

The Avars or more probably the Slavs used these devices during the siege of Constantinople. Their total number is not known and we do not know how many men were able to hide within each of them.⁶⁹ Nor do we know exactly how they were used in battle: the attackers either used them

as covers from under which they could shoot arrows at the defenders in trying to force them off the city walls, or they tried to damage the foundations of the walls, which is how they were used by the Slavs during the siege of Thessalonica in 586. On that occasion, the Slavs tried to undermine the foundations of the outer wall using crowbars and wide axes.⁷⁰ During the siege of Constantinople, the protective shields may have been used as a cover for filling the ditch in front of the walls. Having filled the ditch, the Avars were then able to position the twelve siege towers that they had built in the earlier phases of the siege.

The use of wooden towers prior the Avar siege is attested by the Slavs and Avars during their attack on Thessalonica.⁷¹ During the siege of Constantinople, the Avars and their allies built twelve great siege towers that they had finished by the morning of the fifth day of the attack (2 August). The official report describes them as *pyrgokastelloi*. This term consists of two words: the Greek *pyrgos* and the Latin *castellum*. Other contemporary authors (Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia) mention wooden and false towers.⁷² The Avar khagan had the towers positioned in the central section of the city walls in the area between the Polyandron Gate and the Gate of Saint Romanos. Their height almost reached the battlements of the outer walls.⁷³ The Avars also used the siege towers later in the siege but did not position them so closely to the city walls. Theodore Synkellos mentions that the towers were positioned opposite the bastions of Constantinople's walls.⁷⁴ According to eyewitnesses, the khagan had the towers dismantled once the siege was over.⁷⁵ The sources do not refer to other standard components of siege technology, such as battering rams and scaling ladders, but the latter were certainly part of the weaponry of the Avar army.⁷⁶

AVAR ARTILLERY

Until the invention of firearms, catapults were one of the most traditional devices of conquering fortified cities. The Avars used them on a larger scale at the beginning of the seventh century, since they were forced to confront fortified cities and fortresses in the inland Balkans. The preserved testimonies inform us that the catapults were constructed from available components right on the spot.

It is not easy to exactly classify the typology of these devices.⁷⁷ Military terminology can be found primarily in the Paschal Chronicle, because its

compiler used the official report of the siege.⁷⁸ Several technical terms can also be found in the sermon of Theodore Synkellos who uses the term “afeteria organa” to describe the Avar artillery. However, this term can describe both catapults and ballistae.⁷⁹ Besides that, his sermon includes the term “helepolis”, which in antiquity referred to siege towers. On the other hand, George of Pisidia does not mention such equipment in his poem at all.

The Paschal Chronicle describes the catapults with the rather rare term “petraria”.⁸⁰ The term that is the closest to this in the Byzantine sources is petrobolos, which can be literally translated as the “stone-thrower”. Besides that, the chronicle mentions yet another technical term that could refer to the Avar artillery. This term is manganikon, appearing in Greek sources for the first time during the siege of Constantinople. The author of the siege report surely meant by this term a rather specific type of artillery—the traction catapult.⁸¹

By the first half of the seventh century, this new weapon had become a part of Avar siege equipment, and the Avars, or most probably the Slavs, also used them during the siege of Constantinople.⁸² It was characterized by a simple construction and the great speed of projectiles. John, the Archbishop of Thessalonica, mentioned “mountains and hills” thrown by more than fifty catapults against the eastern part of this city.⁸³ Although these huge stones mostly missed their targets, even one was enough to destroy “a whole block of crenellation to its base”.⁸⁴ Also, there are accounts of “catapults towering to the sky, higher than the battlement of the inner walls” during the Avaro-Slavic attack on Thessalonica in 618.⁸⁵

The effects of the catapults were also described by Greek authors during the siege of Constantinople. During the attack, the khagan needed only three days to build them. As soon as 31 July, several catapults started to operate and the rest of them were in use in the early hours of the following day.⁸⁶ Compared with the previous attack on Thessalonica, the Avars improved their aiming at selected targets. The barrage of stones thrown from the catapults lined up side by side was reportedly so strong that the defenders were forced to place a large number of their own ballistic devices in the central part of the walls. During this attack, the Avars covered their siege engines with freshly slaughtered animal skins.⁸⁷ Besides the traction catapults, the khagan perhaps had various other types of ballistic devices. Theodore Synkellos confirms that the Avars fired at the walls upon command.⁸⁸

THE MONOXYLES

In addition to the attack on the land walls of Constantinople, the Avars also tried to approach the capital from the Golden Horn in simple boats, each made from a single tree trunk, which the Greek authors called “monoxyles” (monoxylai).⁸⁹ This umbrella term is used for a variety of boats.⁹⁰ Due to the vagueness of this expression, it is often problematic to exactly identify what type of monoxyle was being described by particular authors. During the Slavic sieges of Thessalonica in the first half of the seventh century, at least two types were mentioned. The first were simple dug-out canoes made from single tree trunks. Besides these, there were reports of modified monoxyles that were covered with boards and skins to protect them and their crews from incendiary missiles.⁹¹

Contemporary sources on the Avar siege describe these boats under various terms. They appear as “monoxyles” in the Paschal Chronicle and in the homily of Theodore Synkellos. George of Pisidia describes them as “boats” (σκάφη) and “carved boats” (γλυπτὰ σκάφη; ἐσκευωμένα σκάφη).⁹² Among later authors, the term “monoxylon” is used by the patriarch Nikephoros, whereas Theophanes mentions “dug-out boats” (σκάφη γλυπτὰ).⁹³

The Greek authors do not know when or where the khagan had the monoxyles made. The only specific information can be found in Theophanes, according to which the Avars had brought the monoxyles to the Golden Horn from the Danube (Istros).⁹⁴ Several historians adopted this version and supposed that the Slavs sailed on the monoxyles from the estuary of the Danube along the Black Sea coast to the coast of Thrace, from where they could transport their boats by land to the Golden Horn.⁹⁵ Contemporary sources noticed the monoxyles only after the siege had started. The author of the official report (Paschal Chronicle) refers to them only in relation to the khagan’s intention to deploy them in the Golden Horn.⁹⁶ Theodore Synkellos states that at the beginning of the siege, the khagan had ordered that the “trunks”, that is, monoxyles, which he wanted to use for transportation across the Bosphorus, be gathered alongside the prepared siege engines.⁹⁷ George of Pisidia mentions the Slavic boats only later when describing their confrontation with the Roman ships in the final phase of the siege.⁹⁸ Theophanes’s contemporary, the patriarch Nikephoros, also only mentions the Slavic boats during the naval battle in the Golden Horn. He states that the monoxyles were “put out”

into the vicinity of Constantinople from the Barbyzes River that flows into the Golden Horn.⁹⁹ A sermon ascribed to the patriarch Germanos mentions that the Slavic boats were pulled into the waters of the Golden Horn.¹⁰⁰

If the Slavs had sailed to Constantinople from the Danube estuary, they would have had to overcome a relatively long distance along the Black Sea coast. The Slavs were certainly capable of raids on parts of Greece, Asia Minor, and adjacent islands in this time, but a source clearly mentions that the boats were dug-out canoes made from a single tree trunk.¹⁰¹ They could not have been one-mast ships with an additional sail where only the base was made of a single tree trunk. For larger maritime activities, it was quite enough for the Slavs to tie several monoxyles together to make them more stable, as is described in an account of The Miracles of Saint Demetrios. During the “long siege” of Thessalonica, the Slavs tied together three to four canoes to make larger vessels and plundered the adjacent coast for two years.¹⁰²

From the context of the preserved sources on the Avar siege, it is plain that the monoxyles used during the naval operations were simple dug-out canoes made from hollowed or burnt-out tree trunks and nothing more sophisticated than that. They were tied together on the final day of the siege and probably partly covered with additional planks and hides to protect them from missiles.¹⁰³

Moreover, the report by Theophanes does not refer to a source of an official or authentic nature. The mention of the Danube (Istros) needs to be understood as a reference to the traditional border between the Eastern Roman Empire and the Avars. The entire passage shows evident signs of syntactical problems.¹⁰⁴ The Latin author Anastasius Bibliothecarius and the Byzantine chronicler George Kedrenos had access to a better version of Theophanes’s chronicle. They both mention that “the Avars brought from the Istros an innumerable amount of boats, indeed beyond any count.”¹⁰⁵ They only mention the transportation of the boats and not their maritime voyage. The official report on the Avar siege preserved in the Paschal Chronicle also explicitly states that the Avar khagan had brought the monoxyles with him. Hence, the Greek authors agree that the Avars (but more probably the Slavs) had brought the monoxyles themselves, that is, they transported them over land together with supplies and other wooden material. Due to the logistical problems, the khagan probably ordered they be made during his stay in the vicinity of Adrianople.

NUMBERS

Almost all contemporary and later sources stressed the strikingly large numbers of warriors in the Avar army. The official report in the *Paschal Chronicle* mentioned that only the Avar vanguard itself numbered 30,000 men.¹⁰⁶ George of Pisidia speaks about “eight together-gathered myriads”, which would correspond to 80,000 men.¹⁰⁷ The third contemporary source—Theodore Synkellos—asserts that the ratio of the city defenders to the attacking forces was “more than a hundred barbarians” to each defender.¹⁰⁸

In terms of the real numbers, the only available data are in Greek sources, which limit our knowledge for various reasons. The most important is the typical phenomenon of numeric mystification, that is, the intentional exaggeration of the number of enemy warriors. In the case of similar accounts, it is necessary to take into consideration the literary genre and its ideological context. However, even with considerably more realistic data, such as those provided by the *Paschal Chronicle*, it is still only a military estimation. Even if we admitted that the Roman officers were informed of the enemy’s power through their own spies, such information did not necessarily correspond with reality. From previous experience, the Roman commanders knew that “[a] vast herd of male and female horses follows [the Avars], both to provide nourishment and to give the impression of a huge army.”¹⁰⁹ The author of the *Strategikon* explicitly states that when estimating the number of the Scythians (i.e., the Avars), the Roman commanders could not rely upon the information provided by spies because many of them were not able to tell whether the enemy had 20,000 or 30,000 warriors due of the large number of horses.¹¹⁰

The total number of the Avar army during the siege of Constantinople is usually estimated to have been 80,000 men in accordance with the report by George of Pisidia.¹¹¹ Although such a number seems staggering, considering the data on the numbers of military personnel in the armies of that era, it cannot be considered impossible. Menander Protector mentioned around 60,000 heavily armed Avar warriors during their campaign against the Lower Danube Slavs in 578. However, this number seems to be exaggerated and Menander himself presents this information as a hearsay.¹¹² The logistical capacities and especially the provisioning of such a huge number of warriors with food and other necessary supplies must also be taken into consideration. According to the sober language of the

Strategikon, armies usually consisted of 15,000–20,000 men at the end of the sixth century.¹¹³ The Avars undoubtedly organized a great military force against Constantinople, but they could barely have gathered more than 40,000 men, that is, half the number mentioned by George of Pisidia.

NOTES

1. On its structure, cf. Bóna 1988, 451 and 2000, 166–167; Pohl 1988, 170–171; Szentpéteri 1994, 232–234, 248–249; Hofer 1996, 351–352; Nagy 2005, 135–149; most recently Csiky, 2015, 391–398; Kardaras 2015, 7–25 and 2018, 156–159.
2. *Strategikon*, 11.2.364.66–67.
3. Mich. Whitby 1988, 171; cf. also Avramea 2002, 67.
4. Howard-Johnston 1994, 137.
5. According to Pohl (1988, 216), the term “Avar” could have referred to various groups of people: (1) by cultural criteria, it was understood to denominate people united by traditions and type of clothing; (2) in the political sense, it was all the inhabitants of the khaganate; (3) in the social sense, it was the highest class of the nomadic cavalry elite.
6. Szentpéteri 1994, 232; Kardaras 2015, 9.
7. Göckenjan 1993, 298.
8. Szentpéteri 1994, 248–249; cf. also Pritsak 1952, 52–53.
9. Among others, cf.; Bóna 1988, 451 and 2000, 166; Szentpéteri 1994, 232; Nagy 2005, 135–140; most recently: Csiky, 2015, 394–398.
10. Husár, 2005, 38.
11. Szentpéteri 1993, 209.
12. *Strategikon*, 11.2, 362.24–30 (the English translation by Dennis 1984, 116).
13. Cf. a useful summary regarding this term by Grotowski 2010, 126, n. 5, and 154–162.
14. Cf. Haldon 1975, 19–25 and Koliaş 1980, 27–30 and 1988, 66–67.
15. On individual finds, Csallány 1972, 7–44; cf. also Zájbojník 2004, 45; Nagy 2005, 138; Csiky 2015, 394. One of the best-preserved harnesses comes from the locality of Kunszentmárton (Csallány, 1982, 5–35). It probably consisted of 300–330 lamella pieces and its weight was 4.7 kg without the subsequently found 44 lamellae. For this type of armour: Bugarski 2005, 161–179.
16. Theodore Synkellos, 305.23–24.
17. Szentpéteri, 1993, 186–192. For the detailed classification of all types of polearms during the Avar period, cf. Csiky 2015, 68–151.
18. Szentpéteri 1993, 176–86; Csiky 2015, 152–192.
19. Szentpéteri 1993, 192–196.

20. Szentpéteri 1993, 196–205; Bona 1988, 451 and 2000, 166; Csiky 2015, 300–301, 394–396. Kovačević 1977, 116–119; Pohl 1988, 170; Bracher 1990 137–146; on the technology of production and the shooting technique: Kosdi 1998, 11–33; For the Avars' use of stirrups: Zástěrová 1971, 40; Szadeczky-Kardoss 1981, 66–69; Bóna 1988, 444 and 2000, 166; Bálint 1989, 168; Curta 2008, 297–326, Csiky 2015, 392–393.
21. Theodore Synkellos, 308.16–17.
22. Theodore Synkellos, 312.3.
23. Csiky 2015, 396.
24. Szentpéteri 1994. 232.
25. Bóna 1988, 451; Pohl 1988, 173.
26. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.12–14.
27. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.11–12. It is possible that the chronicle also covers other ethnicities under this term: Barišić, 1954, 381.
28. *Strategikon*, 11.3, 374.44–45. For a general survey on the military tactics of the Slavs in that period: Zástěrová 1971, 71; Grotowski 2005, 9–25; Kardaras 2008, 185–205; for their armaments, cf. Kazanski 1999, 197–236; Shuvalov 2004, 255 and 2015, 217–223.
29. Kazanski 1999, 197–236; Shuvalov 2004, 254–263.
30. Prokopios *Bella* 5.27.1–2, 130 and Theophylaktos Simokattes, 7.4.11, 252.
31. Kazanski 2005–2009, 457–471 and 2015, 43–95.
32. For the ongoing debate on relations between Avars and Slavs prior to 626: Labuda 1949, 48–193; Zástěrová, 1958, 19–53; Avenarius 1970, 68–74 and 1974, 85–116; Havlík 1970, 48–56; Pohl 1988, 114–117 and 2000, 341–354; Tyszkiewicz 1989, 95–108; Curta 2001, 90–109. For a completely different view, Pritsak 1983, 414–424.
33. Živković 2008, 17–22.
34. Bóna 1971, 305.
35. Fiedler 1996, 208.
36. Fiedler 1996, 209. For an overview of archaeologically documented settlements of early Slavs in the territory of Romania: Stanciu 2005, 567–582 and 2015, 163–216.
37. Tyszkiewicz 1989, 97.
38. Avenarius 1974, 104–107.
39. Mich. Whitby 1988, 89, and 143–144.
40. Cf., among others, Labuda 1949, 175 and 190; Grafenauer 1950, 78–79; Barišić 1954, 376, n. 2, 394, n. 2; Waldmüller 1976, 281; Havlíková 1979, 131–133; Borovskiy 1988, 114–119; Litavrin 1995b, 236, n. 5; Curta 2001, 55.
41. Kazanski 2011, 46.
42. Ps.-Fredegar, 4.48, 208; Du Cange 1883, 617.

43. In this context, cf. Du Cange 1883, 617; Mayer 1929, 119, also Wallace-Hadrill 1962, 91, and Tyszkiewicz 1989, 103.
44. Labuda 1949, 324–331 and Chaloupecky 1950, 227.
45. Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970: 2, 228–230; 438–440; similarly, Avenarius 1974, 129–130; Schütz 1991, 409–414; Curta 1997, 149.
46. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 197–200, 168, and v. 409–410, 182.
47. Theophanes, 315.9.
48. On the continuity of the Bulgarian settlement, cf. Symonyi 1959, 227–250; Beševliev 1981, 75–85. In this connection, cf. Božilov—Gjuzelev 1999, 69. However, also cf. Bóna 1981, 79–112; Pohl 1988, 227–228 and Ziemann 2007, 50.
49. Cf. Pohl 1988, 227–228.
50. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 7.4.1–7.4.6. Cf. Ditten 1980, 68; Bóna 1981, 104–105; Pohl 1988, 228.
51. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.2.198, 185 and 2.2.202, 186.
52. Ps.-Fredegar, 4.72, 242; Ziemann 2007, 130–131.
53. George Kedrenos, 727.13–14. The compiler did not include the Bulgars in his account on the siege.
54. Bóna 1971, 298–301; Horedt 1985, 164–168; Kiss, 1987, 203–218 and 1992, 41–50; Pohl 1988, 229–232; Kiss T. 2011, 10–21.
55. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 8.3.11–8.3–12, 288.
56. Vida 2008a, 18–24 and 2008b, 58–60; Kiss T. 2011, 12–13.
57. For typology of these weapons, cf. Dobos 2015, 57–88.
58. *Strategikon*, 11.2 354.15–17. On the Persian heavy cavalry, cf. Michalak 1987, 73–86. For the overview of the structure of the Persian army at that time: Christensen 1944, 130–132; Pigulevskaya 1946, 231–234; Widengren 1976, 279–297; Shahbazi 1985, 496–499; Daryae 2009, 45–47; recently Howard-Johnston 2012, 87–127 (for numbers and its organization 108–123).
59. For a basic overview: Nagy 2009, 258–269. For protective shields (“che-lonai”): *Chronicon Paschale* 719.14–15 and 725.3–5; George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 221, 170; Theodore Synkellos, 305.29 and 312.32. From later sources: Nikephoros, 13.15–17. For catapults (“petraria”), cf. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.22, and “manganika”, cf. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.15–16; 719.18; 725.1. For siege towers (“pyrgokastelloi”), cf. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.2; 720.7; 725.3–4, Theodore Synkellos (306.14 and 312.33) mentions wooden towers (“pyrgoi xilinoi”). George of Pisidia (*Bellum Avaricum* v. 222, 170) poetically describes these engines as “false towers”.
60. Theodore Synkellos, 306.15–18. Cf. also McCotter 1996, 211.
61. Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, 2: 24–25, n. 41.
62. Nagy 2009, 264–265.

63. A standard description of these devices can be found by Vegetius (4.14–15, 137–138). On representations of various types of protective shields (“testudos”), cf. Nicolle 2003, 39–40.
64. Agathias, 3.5.9–11, 89.24–90.6.
65. Menander Protector, 40, 246–248.
66. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.139, 148; 1.14.147, 152.
67. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.2.211, 188–189.
68. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.2.203, 186.
69. McCotter 1996, 107, on this type also 106–107.
70. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.147, 152.
71. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.139, 2.2.211, 188, cf also 148–149. Nagy 2009, 262–263.
72. Theodore Synkellos, 306.14 and 312.33; George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum* v. 222, 170.
73. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.1–3.
74. Theodore Synkellos, 308.5–6.
75. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.3; Theodore Synkellos, 312.30–34.
76. Nagy 2009, 263–265.
77. Nagy 2009, 260–262.
78. Speck 1980, 62–64.
79. Sophocles 1914, 285.
80. Dennis 1998, 102, n. 11.
81. Petersen 2013, 413–419.
82. For its use by the Avars, cf. Hurbanič 2015b, 75–89.
83. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.154, 155.
84. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.153, 155.
85. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.2.203, 186.
86. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.18–22; Theodore Synkellos, 306.13–18.
87. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.22.
88. Theodore Synkellos, 311.5; in this connection, also *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.151, 154.
89. The Greek word *tó μουόβλου* represents a generic term that was used to describe various types of such vessels. Cf. Oračev 1982, 101–109; Strässle 1990, 93–106; Havlíková 1990, 89–104. For the typology of these vessels according to the sources from the sixth to seventh centuries: Oračev 1982, 103–106; Strässle 1990, 93–106 (esp. 94–95); Havlíková 1990, 92–97; Vryonis 2003, 68–75. For their use during the Avar siege of 626: Hošek 1974 101–103; Oračev 1982, 103–109; Strässle 1990, 95; Havlíková 1990, 94–96; Vryonis 2003, 74–75. On the construction of monoxyles: Novotný 1951, 253–292.
90. The size of the dug-out canoes known in Europe and other parts of the world varies between 2 and 10 metres. For the details: Novotný 1951, 282–283.

91. In this connection, Havlíková 1990, 103. Some types were supposed to be equipped with an auxiliary mast and a sail. Cf. Strässle 1990, 96; Oračev 1982, 108.
92. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 455, 184 (σκάφη); v. 447, 184 and v. 462, 186 (γλυπτὰ σκάφη); v. 411, 182 (ἔσκοφομένα σκάφη).
93. Nikephoros, 13, 58.23, Theophanes, 316.19.
94. Theophanes, 316.19–20.
95. In this connection, cf. Stanojević 1906: 2, 211; Grafenauer 1950, 77–79; Vernadsky 1952, 198; among more recent authors, this hypothesis was accepted by Waldmüller (1976, 268) and Fine 1983, 43, and Zahariade (2006, 235).
96. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.15–19.
97. Theodore Synkellos, 302.22–23; cf. also 308.6.10 and 310.25–311.25.
98. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 409–410, 182.
99. Nikephoros, 13. 60.30–33.
100. Ps.-Germanos, 16, 195. In this connection, cf. Speck 1986, 209.
101. *Chronicon AD 724*, 18; *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.1.180, 175. Cf. Strässle 1990, 96, n. 20. Vryonis 2003, 70–71.
102. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.4.243, 211.17–20. For these types of monoxyles, cf. Havlikova 1990, 97; Vryonis 2003, 72–73.
103. Compare with Oračev (1982, 105–106), who asserted that the boats used by the Slavs during the sieges of Constantinople and Thessalonica were not monoxyles but actual boats with masts and in some cases additional sails.
104. Speck 1988, 132; already by Barišić, 1954, 383.
105. Anastasius Bibliothecarius, 196.26–27; George Kedrenos, 728.17–18.
106. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.5.
107. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 218–219, 170.
108. Theodore Synkellos, 305.22–23.
109. *Strategikon*, 11.2 362.32–33 (the English translation by Dennis 1984, 116).
110. *Strategikon*, 9.5 328.31–35.
111. Among others, cf. Grafenauer 1950, 91; Barišić 1954, 391; Tsangadas 1980, 85; Pohl 1988, 230; Howard-Johnston 1995, 137; Kaegi 2003, 136; Kardaras 2010, 123. Some suggest that the data in the contemporary sources are exaggerated. Tevyashov (1914, 231) estimates the overall force of the army to have been up to 60,000 men. A. Stratos (1968, 184) estimates it to have been even more (between 120,000 and 150,000), because, according to him, the 80,000 men only corresponded to the troops fighting against the land walls and excluded the Slavic units in the monoxyles in the Golden Horn.

112. Menander Protector, 21, 192.22–23. Szymański and Dąbrowska (1979, 81) estimates the maximum mobilization of the Avar cavalry, including the other nomadic units, to be 50,000 men, which is probably too high.
113. Treadgold 1995, 73–74; Mich. Whitby 1995, 73–75; Haldon 1999, 100; Elton 2007, 276–278.

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CHAPTER 7

The Fortress Constantinople

Constantinople was a true bastion of the Eastern Roman Empire. From 330 it became the new capital and soon a significant economic and strategic centre. In the fifth century, it was the largest city in the Roman East. Conservative estimates suggest that by the middle of the sixth century, the city and its suburbs housed more than 400,000 people.¹ The continual epidemics of plague, famine, and earthquakes surely lowered its population, which may have been partly supplemented by refugees from the Balkans and other areas in times of frequent military conflicts.² The defence of the new capital was therefore the primary strategic task of every emperor. In the first centuries, Constantinople was not at risk of potential naval attack, apart from the distant Vandal threat in the fifth century. But in case of frequent land raids coming from the north, its defence had to be secured by various fortifications defending the Lower Danube limes, the Balkans, and the vulnerable region of Thrace.³ If they fell, then Constantinople would centre on the massive western walls built during the reign of Theodosios II.

THE THEODOSIAN WALLS

The Theodosian Walls were the pride of Constantinople. Still imposing, they are one of the last reminders of this ancient capital on the Bosphorus. Dating their construction is dependent on an interpretation of preserved

narrative and epigraphic sources as well as an evaluation of the archaeological material.⁴ The first verified record of their existence and of their completion is a decree found in the *Codex Theodosianus* dated 4 April 413.⁵ The walls were built over eight years and most likely in one stage. Those who argue for a later date of completion for the outer walls, that is, after the great earthquake in 447, refer to older and recently published epigraphical material.⁶ Despite the new arguments, some factors cast the notion of a two-stage building process into doubt; the most important of these is the extremely short period of construction (only sixty days) and the problematic and often disputable interpretation of epigraphic and narrative sources. Furthermore, it is necessary to take into account the specifications of these fortifications, which reveal a mutual interconnection of separate building elements of the fortifications despite some differences in building technique.⁷

The Theodosian Walls, about 6.5 kilometres long, are located 1.5 kilometres from the original city walls built by Constantine the Great. They consist from inner wall, 12 metres in height, strengthened by ninety-six towers.⁸ In front of it, there was 15 metres of open space known as the Peribolos used by the forces defending the strategically important outer wall. This was called a “Proteichisma” and it also had ninety-six towers.⁹ Even though this wall was smaller, having a height of just 8 metres, it was the first line of defence for the city.¹⁰ Before this wall, there was another 15 metres of open space which was covered by a battlement. Under its protection, military units would gather before attacking the enemy. Usually, the last part of the whole fortification system was a moat which increased the distance between the attackers and the defenders, thus slowing the enemy’s advance to the walls.¹¹ It is not known to what degree it was an obstacle for the Avars and their allies, because sources from that period do not mention it.¹² The top of the walls had a battlement which protected the defenders from falling stones and arrows. The lower part of the walls included temporary accommodation for soldiers and storage depots. Various throwing devices were positioned on the roofs of the towers.¹³

The Theodosian Walls have had main and postern gates, with small entrances on the outer wall and main entrances in the inner wall.¹⁴ On both sides, the gates were protected by massive towers.¹⁵ After the arrival of the Avar army, the Slavs formed the dominant group in the northern and western sectors of the Theodosian Walls. The main Avar attack was concentrated in the central part of the fortifications between *tau*

*Polyandriou*¹⁶ and *ton Pemptou* Gates, with the Gate of Saint Romanos in its centre.¹⁷

The main weakness of this part of the fortifications was the lowering terrain of the valley of the Lykos River. The line of the walls had to accommodate the valley slope, which descended in some parts to such a degree that the defenders were effectively below the level of the attacking armies.¹⁸ George of Pisidia mentions that the khagan and his forces were positioned near the Philoxenon Gate, which has a unique name and a disputed location. Most likely, this gate was positioned in the central section of the Theodosian Walls.¹⁹

THE FORTIFICATIONS OF BLACHERNAI AND ALONG THE GOLDEN HORN

The Theodosian Walls originally did not reach to the Golden Horn. The huge construction of two lines of fortifications now ends near the ruins of the Palace of the Porphyrogennetos (Tekfur Saray). Here the original double line of the Theodosian Walls is intersected by a massive simple wall with bastions which was built during the reconstruction of the whole Blachernai hillock area during the reign of Manuel I Komnenos (1143–1180). This wall deviates from the line of the Theodosian Walls and extends towards the adjacent plain by the Golden Horn.

The problem of the topography of the north-western fortifications during the Avar siege, however, concerns the previous development of the Blachernai area.²⁰ The well-informed historian Prokopios notes that at the time of the completion of his work *De Aedificiis* (before 558), the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai was not protected by a wall. According to him, the Churches of Blachernai and Pege “were erected outside the city-wall, the one where it starts beside the shore of the sea, the other close to the Golden Gate, as it is called, which chances to be near the end of the line of fortifications, in order that both of them may serve as invincible defences to the circuit-wall of the city”.²¹ It is therefore obvious that at least a part of Blachernai with the Church of the Mother of God was not protected by the wall at this time.

Another important, albeit indirect, reference regarding the western fortifications of Constantinople in 626 is an anonymous sermon (BHG 1058) describing the deposition of the precious garment of Mother of God in Blachernai (*Inventio et depositio vestis in Blachernis*). Unfortunately, this text does not mention any names (not even of the enemies, let alone of the emperor or of the patriarch of those

times). The question of the authorship of this source is just as disputable; however, the majority of scholars are in favour of dating it to the seventh century. The preserved manuscripts attribute it to Theodore Synkellos, who is also considered to be the author of the homily of the Avar attack in 626.²² Part of this sermon describes the rescuing of the garment (*esthes*) of the Mother of God from the Blachernai church and its placement in the Hagia Sophia. Already, A. Wenger stated that this event was connected with the first Avar incursion to Constantinople (dated by him to 619 but now usually placed in 623).²³ However, J. Wortley has presented some serious arguments in favour of the later composition of the sermon and connects it with the first Russian attack on Constantinople in 860.²⁴ Wortley built on some arguments of the editor of that text, C. Loparev, but he could not satisfactorily clarify the key motif of that text where a planned meeting between the emperor and the barbarian ruler to discuss peace negotiations is mentioned.²⁵ This sentence clearly refers to the planned meeting between Emperor Herakleios and the Avar khagan in Herakleia in June 623. Furthermore, the mention of two emperors in the *Depositio* clearly refers to Herakleios and his son from his first marriage to Fabia Eudokia, Herakleios-Constantine, who was crowned on 22 January 612 according to an official record in the *Paschal Chronicle*.²⁶

In 623 the Avars made their way into the Constantinople outskirts and pillaged the sacral complex of Saints Kosmas and Damianos and the Church of the Archangel Michael in the quarter of Promotos. In relation to this, the anonymous author of the *Depositio* stated that when “our enemies were laying waste and overrunning everything in front of the city wall, churches as well as everything else, some of our people decided that it would be sensible to take the initiative and remove the gold and silver treasure in the church of Blachernai, lest our enemies should dare to overrun that too with their barbarian and greedy nature”.²⁷

It is evident that this information cannot relate to the Russian attack in 860, as suggested by Wortley, because at that time the Blachernai church was already protected by an outer wall erected after the Avar siege. Therefore, it was not necessary to take its valuables anywhere to safety. More importantly, after pillaging the monastery of Saints Kosmas and Damianos, the enemies, that is, the Avars, unexpectedly approached the outskirts of Blachernai where the Church of the Mother of God was located. The decision and initiative of the unnamed men to take the precious ornamentation of the church had to have a logical purpose only if

the church was not protected by an outer wall. The *Depositio* is therefore in agreement with the report by Prokopios of Kaisareia.

Now the mentions concerning the fortifications of Constantinople during the Avar siege will be examined. The first of these can be found in the poem *Bellum Avaricum* by George of Pisidia, which refers to the building of a “new wall”.²⁸ In interpreting this information, some authors assumed that it was the single wall (Μόνοτειχος) of Blachernai which protected the Church of the Mother of God.²⁹ However, J. L. Van Dieten clearly highlighted that the order to build the new wall was given by Emperor Herakleios himself. His written instructions concerning the provision of defences would have got to Constantinople some weeks before the siege began.³⁰ In this case, it would not have been possible to build a more solid type of fortification. This is obvious enough in George of Pisidia’s use of the words *πλέκειν τεῖχος νέον* (literally: “to braid/plait” a new wall).³¹ The most endangered place for the building of such a construction was the unprotected coastal part of Blachernai by the Golden Horn.³²

We also have reports that the khagan’s army was positioned from Brachialion to Brachialion.³³ This term comes from the Latin word *brachium* (an arm) but it can also refer to a wall connecting two fortified points. The brachialia of Constantinople were most probably citadels located at the end of the north and south projection of the Theodosian Walls.³⁴ A similar type of such a fortification was located in Chersonesos in Thrace, which prevented the access of enemies coming over land.³⁵ The historian Agathias expressly states that this fortification stretched out to the sea.³⁶ It is possible that the Brachialion of Blachernai also extended to the waters of the Golden Horn. The former emperors apparently did not expect the attack from the eastern side of the bay; however, in 626 the khagan prepared a “fleet” of dug-out boats which he wanted to bypass this fortification on the last day of the siege. Other coastal Byzantine towns could also be protected by similar types of fortifications.³⁷

The northern Brachialion of Constantinople had to reach the waters of the Golden Horn; however, its exact location remains a subject of dispute. It has long been linked to the remains of a double-sided wall located by Meyer-Plath and Schneider between the towers of Emperor Theophilos (sixteen and eighteen) with embrasures on both sides.³⁸ It has been assumed that a simple transverse wall was connected to it and extended to the Golden Horn in order to block the access of enemies coming from the land side.³⁹ In such a case, it is, however, questionable how the Avars or Slavs were able to enter the Church of the Theotokos, probably during the

final attack on the city or immediately after it.⁴⁰ Moreover, the proposed solution fundamentally contradicts with the contemporary sources of the Avar siege.⁴¹ The incursion of enemies into the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai is expressly mentioned in the Paschal Chronicle and in a more vague form by George of Pisidia.⁴² In addition, other sources clearly indicate that the Church of the Theotokos was located outside the city walls until the end of the Avar siege.⁴³

The second possible location of the Brachialion of the Golden Horn is the area near the Church of Saint Demetrios Kanabes with the still-existing traces of the old transverse wall.⁴⁴ An anonymous source preserved by the Constantinopolitan patriarch Nikephoros, dated around 640, stated that the fortification which had to have been attacked by the Avars and the Slavs on the last day of the siege was the outer wall of Blachernai, the one known as Pteron.⁴⁵ Attention should be drawn to two factors in this regard: (1) Nikephoros's source obviously mentioned the wall of Blachernai, and (2) it provides the name of this wall together with its technical specification (*proteichisma*).

The name Pteron (the Wing) indicates a wall which stood out of the fortification line.⁴⁶ This could be the Brachialion, a transverse wall extending into the waters of the Golden Horn, which was likely meant to prevent access to the unprotected adjacent coast. However, Nikephoros's source expressly states that it was a *proteichisma*, an outer wall. If the transverse wall by the Church of Saint Demetrios Kanabes is considered to be Pteron, such a construction cannot be called a *proteichisma*. Moreover, Nikephoros's source and the contemporary Paschal Chronicle confirm the existence of the wall of Blachernai during the Avar siege. According to the official report on the Avar siege preserved in the Paschal Chronicle, the "Armenians", certainly the Armenian troops which formed one part of the Constantinopolitan defences, went out behind the "Wall of Blachernai" and burned the adjacent colonnade near the Church of Saint Nicholas after the naval attack of the monoxyles in the Golden Horn. From this report, it is evident that this sanctuary stood in front of the present fortification line in that area and near the waters of the Golden Horn. Possibly, it can be identified with the Church of Saints Nicholas and Priskos, which was located near the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai. The well-informed Prokopios states that Emperor Justinian, who ordered its construction, "forced back the wash of the sea and set the foundations far out into the water when he established this sanctuary".⁴⁷ If the Church of Saints Nicholas and Priskos was identical with the later Church of Saint

Nicholas, then its name was undoubtedly changed, because it was originally consecrated to the martyrs, whereas in the seventh century it was connected with the person of Saint Nicholas, the famous Bishop of Myra.⁴⁸

The Church of Saint Nicholas has been usually placed in the area between the present walls of Blachernai and the wall of Emperor Leon V, which was constructed in 813.⁴⁹ According to the later testimony of Anna Komnene, the Church of Saint Nicholas was located next to the gate above the imperial palace in Blachernai.⁵⁰ However, this is only vague expression and the location of the Church of Saint Nicholas within the citadel between the walls of Blachernai and that of Leon V is only based on a still-existing spring (*hagiasma*), which supposedly refers to the former existence of this sanctuary. Beside of that, tradition associates the abovementioned spring with the name of Saint Basil instead of Nicholas.⁵¹ Based on these and other facts, the location of the Church of Saint Nicholas mentioned during the Avar siege cannot be localized between the later walls of Blachernai and that of Leon V.⁵² The only definite information is that it was situated before the contemporary line of the walls of Blachernai near the Church of the Theotokos and in the immediate vicinity of the Golden Horn.

Emperor Herakleios was aware of the vulnerable position of the most famous Marian shrine of Constantinople. After the Avar siege, he ordered to build a new wall which enclosed the area around the Church of the Theotokos. This fact is recorded in the Paschal Chronicle: “In this year was built the wall around the church of Our Lady the Mother of God, outside the so-called Pteron.”⁵³ An anonymous notice on the edge of the Vatican manuscript of this chronicle contains the following information: “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Herakleios was built the wall outside Blachernai, and the temple of the all-holy Mother of God was enclosed inside, together with the Holy Reliquary (Hagios Soros); for previously it was outside the wall.”⁵⁴ Apparently, this quotation is not from the Megas Chonographos as originally assumed, and the fifteenth regnal year of Emperor Herakleios is probably related to his son Herakleios-Constantine.⁵⁵ Another thing is important—the anonymous author of this notice clearly states that the new wall was built outside of Blachernai. If this quarter of Constantinople had had no wall until that time, then this formulation would have lost its meaning. Such a reference is logical only if a part of Blachernai (but not a church) was already protected by the fortification.

The new wall is also mentioned in the anonymous source used by the patriarch Nikephoros, where it is stated that after the end of the Avar

siege, the young Emperor Herakleios-Constantine and the patriarch Sergios “immediately built a wall and made a fortress from this Church”.⁵⁶ The last reference of the existence of this new wall comes from the later Patria of Constantinople, according to which the Church of the Theotokos “stood outside the walls, but under Herakleios they (the church and the Chapel of Holy Reliquary) were included within the walls, as many miracles and visions of the Holy Mother of God had happened there”.⁵⁷

The Wall of Herakleios had to be built in front of the existing fortification, and it had to enclose the Church of the Theotokos, which originally stood in front of the fortification line.⁵⁸ Whether this new wall covered the entire area of Blachernai must remain open.⁵⁹ But the testimonies describing its construction indicate that its primary purpose was to protect the Church of the Theotokos and not the whole quarter of Blachernai.⁶⁰ This fact is also suggested by the source of Nikephoros, where it is stated that after building a new wall, the Church of the Theotokos acquired the character of a separate fortress (*frouirion*).

If we assume that at the time of the Avar siege the whole area of Blachernai remained unprotected, we cannot explain a reference in the Paschal Chronicle which confirmed the existence of a wall in Blachernai near the Church of Saint Nicholas and a note preserved by the patriarch Nikephoros that this fortification was an outer wall (*proteichisma*).⁶¹ The only satisfactory explanation that takes into account all testimonies is that at the time of the Avar siege, the Churches of the Theotokos and of Saint Nicholas were situated in front of the wall of Blachernai. This wall was extended to the waters of the Golden Horn, where it formed a fortified citadel (Brachialion). The wall of Blachernai was therefore located near the two abovementioned churches, and on the last day of the attack it was a witness to the final combined attack of the Avars and the Slavs in the Golden Horn.

THE WALL ALONG THE GOLDEN HORN

In this attack, the Avar khagan evidently tried to exploit a weak point in the defences of Constantinople. The region of Blachernai was protected against land attack by a wall which extended into the waters of the Golden Horn, but it is still unclear whether the fortification line continued along the entire coast of the bay. This question is difficult to answer since no archaeological and epigraphical material is preserved proving its existence in that area prior to 626.⁶² According to the general view, Constantinople

had its own wall along the Golden Horn in the reign of Constantine the Great, being prolonged by the Constantinopolitan prefect Kyros in 439 under Theodosios II.⁶³ His order is traditionally explained by the changed situation in the western Mediterranean after the rise of the Vandals, whose fleets seriously distorted Roman marine hegemony.⁶⁴ By erecting of such a wall, one had to take into account two existing harbours (Neorion and Proosphorion) located in the eastern part of the Golden Horn.⁶⁵

A more sceptical view on this matter was expressed in 1964 by V. Grumel who concluded that the area of the Golden Horn was protected only in 439 on the orders of the emperor Theodosios II. However, Grumel maintained that there was no wall in the area between the Constantine walls and the quarter of Blachernai.⁶⁶ In 2001, C. Mango also concluded that there was any wall at the Golden Horn in the times of Constantine Great but he admits the possibility that it was erected after 439.⁶⁷ It is indeed probably that a part of the Golden Horn was not protected by the wall; otherwise, it is difficult to explain the attack of the monoxyles in the final phase of the Avar siege.⁶⁸ As pointed out elsewhere, the position of the Constantinopolitan ships in the Golden Horn also suggests that at least a part of the coast, ca. 1.5 kilometre long, remained open, as Grumel had already observed.⁶⁹

THE DEFENCE OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Constantinople was a city of emperors, and this fact increased both its political and strategic importance. Until 626, almost all attempts to threaten the capital had the nature of traditional raids rather than direct attacks on its walls.⁷⁰ Probably the most serious threat before the beginning of the seventh century was an attempt by the rebellious comes foederatorum Vitalianus, who came to the vicinity of Constantinople in 515.⁷¹

Despite the strategic importance of Constantinople, strong military units were seldom positioned there for its defence.⁷² Emperors always preferred to protect the Balkan provinces from the Danube. This defence consisted of frontier units located in fortresses and the mobile field armies. In the case of their absence or bad cooperation, Constantinople was easily exposed to the risk of enemy attack. The Bulgar and Kutrigur attacks of 539/540 and 558/559 revealed the vulnerability of capital's defences and inadequate forces for its protection.⁷³ All available Balkan troops were merged into one field army during the reign of the Emperor Maurikios.⁷⁴ Such measures were required due to the increasing number of Avar

invasions which could be faced only by a strong army under unified command. However, most of the regular troops in that area moved to the eastern front after the renewed war with Persia in 604. Despite this, Constantinople was not under direct threat because both Phokas and his successor Herakleios paid the Avars to secure peace. Around 620, Herakleios concentrated the most elite part of the former field armies under his command.⁷⁵ Due to a fear of a possible Avar offensive, he left a certain part of his field troops to protect Constantinople. These troops were apparently concentrated near the Long Walls and protected the immediate vicinity of the capital.⁷⁶

Herakleios left Constantinople in 624 and began his four-year-long offensive against the Persians. He entrusted the administration of the city to the patrician and magister Bonos whose career has remained unknown, but for sure he had to belong to a circle of close imperial associates.⁷⁷ All available military forces in the city were under his command. Besides the already mentioned field troops, these forces mainly included palace guards (*scholae*, *protectores*, and *domestici*).⁷⁸

The main parts of Late Roman heavy infantry armour included a helmet, breastplate, leg-armour, and wide-round or oval shields. Their main weapons were spears and swords.⁷⁹ The light infantry was armoured with slings, bows, and javelins.⁸⁰ The cavalry was protected by mail up to the knees. Their basic armour also included a small oval shield fixed to the left hand with a thong. The main weapons consisted of spears, swords, and bows.⁸¹ According to the *Strategikon* of Maurikios, the horses of the commanders and horses in the first line of the cavalry had armour plates on their chests and necks.⁸² Together with other parts of the armour, such as cavalry lances and throat-guards, these protective parts were introduced into the Eastern Roman army under the influence of the Avars.⁸³

George of Pisidia mentions various categories of people who participated in the protection of the capital. Besides the highest civil and military officers, he specifies two categories: foreigners and citizens.⁸⁴ Different categories of inhabitants could fall under the category of citizens (*politai*). They probably covered simple people carrying out auxiliary works such as strengthening the walls and protecting less important parts during the attack. In a narrower sense, they could be individuals able to fight who assisted the soldiers in the defence.⁸⁵ Members of various civic guilds and primarily circus factions played an important role in the militia. The fanatical youth among the partisans of the factions caused frequent riots and

violence in the city. Many of them had weapons, although their possession was generally forbidden. Moreover, a certain part of them had a lot of “experience” of street fighting. Therefore, they always represented a risk factor. However, in cases of acute need, emperors were forced to use these partisans to form a city militia. Most of them were probably allocated directly into military divisions.⁸⁶ During the Avar siege, the militia assisted the mobile troops.⁸⁷ Sailors from the ships stationed in the Golden Horn also joined the defence units in cases of emergency.⁸⁸ The second term, foreigners (*xenoi*), is not very clear. The author could mean foreigners in general sense of meaning or just foreign mercenaries staying in the city, further, the field units which came to the capital from the region of Thrace, or perhaps the troops sent by Emperor Herakleios to help the city.⁸⁹

THE REINFORCEMENTS FOR THE ENDANGERED CITY

Before starting the siege of the city, George of Pisidia wrote an emotive poem dedicated to the patrician and magister Bonos, where he addresses Herakleios rhetorically and asked him to come and help the besieged capital.⁹⁰ His urgent words did not force the emperor to change his plans, but in his other poem, the Avar War, George added that the emperor indeed “sent an army in advance and so neglected his own safety”.⁹¹ The second key witness of the Avar siege, Theodore Synkellos, did not know anything about these reinforcements, although he mentioned Herakleios’s letters and orders.⁹² Only the late source of Theophanes clearly stated that Herakleios sent help to the city after he learned about the preparation of the Avars and their allies to take Constantinople: “When the emperor learnt of this, he divided his army into three contingents: the first he sent to protect the City; the second he entrusted to his own brother Theodore, whom he ordered to fight Sain (Shahen); the third part he took himself and advanced to Lazica.”⁹³ Herakleios certainly ensured a maritime connection with the capital and he sent some reinforcements in advance by ships through the Black Sea.⁹⁴ The presence of Armenian troops mentioned during the last day of the Avar siege could support this fact.⁹⁵ But it is unlikely that the emperor advanced to Lazica already in the time of culminating Avar crisis and in the presence of the two Persian armies operating in Asia Minor.⁹⁶ Only after the victory over the Persian army of Shahen, Herakleios could send a larger army headed by his brother Theodore to help the capital.⁹⁷

THE NAVY

The naval fleet was also an important part of the defences of Constantinople. Until beginning of the Arab invasions, the Eastern Roman Empire maintained its maritime hegemony in the Mediterranean. The imperial fleet was one of the key elements of the Roman expansion under Justinian, which returned Italy and northern Africa back to the empire. However, we only have a little information about the imperial naval forces from the second half of the sixth century. There are also uncertainties concerning their size and exact typology.⁹⁸ The Danube fleet was still being deployed against the Avars and Slavs during the reign of Emperor Maurikios and perhaps later.⁹⁹ Some warships were probably anchored in larger cities, including Constantinople.¹⁰⁰ These were dromons: fast and light ships with one row of oars. It seems from the contemporary written sources and depictions that they were quite small ships with an estimated length of about 28 metres and a width of 4.5 metres. The average number of crew was about twenty to thirty men, who were both oarsmen and sailors.¹⁰¹

Before the Avar attack began, all available ships in Constantinople were prepared for combat according to the written instructions of Emperor Herakleios. However, it is questionable what kinds of ship were in Constantinople at that time. George of Pisidia literally mentions a “gathering of armed ships”; he probably had in mind the warships and not the civilian vessels.¹⁰² But the boundary between both types of ship was not clearly defined at that time; for example, due to their sailing capabilities and speed, dromons were also used for transport of grain.¹⁰³ The adaptation of civilian dromons for military purposes could not be such a big problem. We know from the Strategikon of Maurikios that these vessels were additionally modified for specific combat conditions. If necessary, they also had archers who could protect themselves against a possible attack with an improvised wooden structure. Catapults covered with coarse fabric were also located at the front of these vessels.¹⁰⁴ Before beginning of the Avar siege, several kinds of vessels were present in Constantinople. They protected the Bosphorus during the Avar siege to prevent the joining of the Avar and Persian forces. Moreover, this strait was also protected by many civilian ships that belonged to various city institutions, including orphanages.¹⁰⁵

Another risky area for the naval defence was the area of the Golden Horn. Its calm waters were protected by vessels which the contemporary official report called *skapphokaraboi*.¹⁰⁶ This name is quite unique in Greek

sources. Mich. and Mar. Whitby translated it as “cutters”, that is, light and fast coastal patrol boats and a special type of manoeuvrable boat designed to combat the monoxyles in the enclosed waters of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus.¹⁰⁷ According to C. Zuckerman, *skaphokaraboi* were probably commercial sailboats rather than specialized battleships and could also be manoeuvred by oars.¹⁰⁸ This may be possible, but there is no such proof in the sources. The technical term *σκαφοκάραβοι* is only mentioned by the author of the Paschal Chronicle in connection with the Avar siege. The later patriarch Nikephoros instead had *διήρεις μὲν καὶ τριήρεις*.¹⁰⁹ The very term *σκαφοκάραβος* (*σκαφοκάραβοι* in its plural form) is in fact a compound consisting of the two Greek nouns—*τὸ σκάφος* and *ὁ κάραβος*. The first of these denotes a small ship or a ship in the general meaning. The second one originally means a small boat.¹¹⁰ The *κάραβοι* were, however, qualified as warships (*dieres*) in later Aphrodite Papyri (c. 709–715/716).¹¹¹ This is then in accordance with the later statement of the patriarch Nikephoros. Also, the very name of the first permanent military naval establishment of the Byzantine Empire (*Καραβισιάνοι*) derives from the Greek term *κάραβος*.¹¹² Therefore, the possibility that the *σκαφοκάραβοι* were in fact light warships and not civil sailboats cannot be totally excluded. It must be bear in mind that the Golden Horn was the place which was exposed to the attack of the dug-out canoes of the enemy, and it is thus probable that the defence there consisted of the best and most experienced naval forces.

NUMBERS

Before the beginning of the Avar siege, a quick inspection of combatant forces was carried out in Constantinople. According to the official record, the defence consisted of more than 12,000 cavalrymen.¹¹³ However, it is difficult to say whether they represented all available armed forces in the city. The given number is remarkably high, because it corresponds to one field army at that time.¹¹⁴ Just for comparison: Emperor Maurikios’s commanders had at their disposal a far lower number of warriors for fighting against the Avars. For example, Theophylaktos Simokattes mentions once that the Balkan army consisted of about 10,000 men, of whom only 6000 were capable of fighting.¹¹⁵

Twelve thousand men represented a solid counterweight to the Avar troops and their allies. It was a force which could fulfil defensive tasks and lead an effective counterattack, which was finally proven during the siege

itself. A significant part of these forces apparently consisted of troops which Emperor Herakleios had left in the city. Another part included the rest of the army of Thrace located in the suburbs of Constantinople. The third part consisted of military reinforcements which Herakleios had sent to help the city. Less important units of the army included the palace guards, consisting of not more than 1000–2000 men. Finally, the private troops of prominent Roman officers and city militias supported by sailors in cases of need should be added to the total amount of troops.¹¹⁶ The possible number of defenders of Constantinople can be estimated at around 15,000 men.¹¹⁷

THE MILITARY TACTICS OF THE DEFENDERS

The civil and military officials of Constantinople certainly improved the defence of their capital and strengthened the weaker parts of the fortifications. Emperor Herakleios encouraged them to do this in his letter, where he allegedly ordered them to

repair safe access to the walls (or foundations of the fortifications) thoroughly where it was necessary, build open protrusions on the towers, build palisades and design fixed stakes, construct a new wall, make twists of archers, produce fast-moving machines and equipment for the throwing of stones, and prepare armed ships which the Emperor ordered to prepare for the fight in advance.¹¹⁸

The author of this reference, George of Pisidia, rhetorically retold the content of Herakleios's letter. The first order probably referred to the repair of the access stairs to the walls.¹¹⁹ A clarification of the second reference is more difficult; the defenders probably had to construct improvised wooden structures on top of the towers.¹²⁰ They also erected palisades in endangered places along the walls and imbedded wooden stakes which were directed at the enemy.¹²¹

According to George of Pisidia, Herakleios also sent plans to construct the various machines, but it is not possible to find out any more specific information from such a general expression.¹²² It is also not clear what the author meant by "fast-moving machines and devices".¹²³ Maybe this was light portable artillery that could be moved by the defenders very quickly according to their needs. It is even harder to define the typology of these machines. Technically more demanding torsion machines had almost disappeared from the empire by the second half of the sixth century.¹²⁴

The defenders placed their artillery inside the walls during the Avar siege.¹²⁵ However, only the upper floors of the fortified towers were

designed for defence, namely for artillery with a flat flight path. Therefore, it is possible that the defenders located larger throwing devices between the inner and outer walls.¹²⁶ We have reports from a later siege of Constantinople that artillery was deployed on the roofs of the towers of the inner wall.¹²⁷ The defenders of the capital apparently followed traditional instructions for city protection. The unknown author of the *Strategikon* of Maurikios recommended the defenders protect the walls with coarse fabric.¹²⁸ A fact that such practices were not only theoretical is supported by evidence from the siege of Thessalonica by the Avars and the Slavs in ca. 618.¹²⁹ The *Strategikon* of Maurikios also mentions the use of wooden beams which were hung out in front of the battlements or structures made of bricks to increase the walls.¹³⁰ However, we do not have any information about these measures from the Avar siege.

SUPPLYING THE CITY WITH FOOD AND WATER

Constantinople had a balanced stock of food and water. The Avars attacked the city in the hot summer months during the harvest. The inhabitants tried to harvest remnants of the yield under the protection of Roman troops. It is not known whether Herakleios or the supreme commander of the city magister Bonos issued instructions for the requisition of provisions.¹³¹ Herakleios abolished the free provision of civic bread which had been allocated to the vast majority of population in Constantinople since the reign of the Constantine the Great only after the occupation of Egypt by the Persians.¹³² Despite this drastic measure, no riots occurred, although the inhabitants had to pay a fixed sum in the amount of three coppers for bread from this time. Riots caused by food shortages appeared in the city only in May 626, about seven weeks before the start of the Avar siege.¹³³

The defenders did not suffer from lack of water, as the siege lasted only for ten days. Although Constantinople and its hinterland did not have sufficient sources of drinking water, its supply was ensured by a large aqueduct that transported water to the city over a distance of 120 kilometres.¹³⁴ We know from later reports that the Avars apparently damaged the aqueduct before the beginning of the siege, but the actual degree of this damage remains a subject of speculation.¹³⁵ If the Avars had succeeded in reducing the supply of water to the city, water stocks were not endangered in any more serious way. There were many cisterns and reservoirs in Constantinople which were enough for survival even during a longer siege.¹³⁶

NOTES

1. Jacoby 1961, 108; Mango 1985, 51; Koder 1984, 117–118; Teall 1959, 100; and Ward-Perkins 2000, 66.
2. Pohl (1988, 427, n. 19) estimated about 200,000–300,000 inhabitants for Constantinople at the beginning of the seventh century. The number of 100,000 households is preserved in an anonymous Chinese account from the beginning of the seventh century (Schreiner 1989, 494).
3. For general overview, cf. Liebeschuetz 2007, 101–134. On the Long Walls of Thrace, cf. esp. Croke 1982, 59–78; Mich. Whitby 1985, 560–583; Crow 1995, 109–124.
4. For the latest discussion on these sources: Lebek 1995, 107–153; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 35–53. Cf. also Pfeilschifter 2010, 794–795.
5. *Codex Theodosianus*, 15.1.51, 813; Speck 1973, 135–136; Müller-Wiener 1977, 286; Lebek 1995, 113 and n. 6. Bardill 2004, 122.
6. Among others, cf. Van Millingen 1899, 45–46; Janin 1964, 265; Tsangadas 1980, 9–10; Lebek 1995, 130–146; recently also Philippides and Hanak 2011, 299 and 302.
7. In this regard, cf. Speck 1973, 140 and 162; Croke 1981, 136–138; Kalkan and Şahin 1994, 148–153; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 35–53 and Pfeilschifter 2010, 795. For constructional and structural evidence, Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 16; Foss and Winfield 1986, 45; Bardill 2004, 122; and Crow 2007, 265–266.
8. Van Millingen 1899, 51–53; Meyer-Plath—Schneider 1943, Janin 1964, 267; Müller-Wiener 1977, 286; Tsangadas 1980, 11; Philippides and Hanak 2011, 307. According to N. Asutay-Effenberger (2007, 27–35), the inner wall originally had only ninety-four or ninety-five towers.
9. Van Millingen 1899, 53–55; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, Janin 1964, 266–267; Tsangadas 1980, 12–13; Müller-Wiener 1977, 286; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 3–4.
10. Tsangadas 1980, 13.
11. Van Millingen 1899, 55–58; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 19–20 and 36–37; Janin 1964, 266; Müller-Wiener 1977, 186–187; Tsangadas 1980, 13–14; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 4; Hanak and Philippides 2011, 309–310.
12. Tsangadas 1980, 247, n. 39.
13. Tsangadas 1980, 12.
14. Van Millingen’s classification of the gates as either “civilian” or “military” has met with criticism from many authors. Despite this, such a distinction is still made in recent works.
15. On the individual gates: Van Millingen 1899, 59–64; Janin 1964, 267–283; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 11–16 and 37–95; Tsangadas

- 1980, 16–21; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 86–106; and Philippides and Hanak 2011, 312–343.
16. In the manuscript of *Chronicon Paschale* (719, app.) was originally written tou *Koliandriou*.
 17. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.9–10. Asutay-Effenberger (2003, 1–4 and 2007, 87–94) has questioned the traditional identification of the Gate of Saint Romanos with *Topkapı* and instead of this she placed it between the fifty-ninth and sixtieth towers (the fourth side gate) according to the newly discovered inscription. However, cf. the subsequent reaction of Philippides and Hanak (2011, 335). As the Pempton Gate is usually considered present Sulukulekapı (cf. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 12 and 70; Janin 1964, 280; Berger 1988, 604–605; Hanak and Philippides 2011, 337). Asutay-Effenberger (2007, 94–106) identified it with the *Topkapı*. The Polyandriou Gate is predominantly identified with the present Mevlevihane kapı. Cf. especially Preger 1905, 272–276; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 12, and 66–68; Berger 1988, 622–623; Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 94–95, 106–110.
 18. Van Millingen 1899, 86; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 2, Janin 1964, 278; Tsangadas 1980, 19; Philippides and Hanak 2011, 310–312.
 19. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 217, 170. Cf. Pertusi 1959, 215; Janin 1964, 280, n. 4.
 20. Contrary to C. Mango (1986, 1–5 and 2002, 449–455) and N. Asutay-Effenberger (2007, 15), I see no reason to question the traditional localization of the 14th region with that of Blachernai. Cf. Hurbanič 2019 (forthcoming).
 21. Prokopios *De Aedificiis*, 1.3, 21 (the English translation by Dewing, 1940, 41).
 22. On these manuscripts: Wenger 1955, 115.
 23. Wenger 1955, 117–123; cf. also Av. Cameron 1979, 46.
 24. Wortley 1977, 111–126 and 2005, 183–185.
 25. *In depositionem pretiosae vestis* 2, 593; cf. Wortley 1977, 118, and Van Dieten 1985, 160.
 26. *Chronicon Paschale*, 702.19–21.
 27. *In depositionem pretiosae vestis* 4, 595–596 (the English translation by Av. Cameron 1979, 50).
 28. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 273, 174.
 29. Pernice 1905, 140–141. A. Pertusi (1956, 217–218) argued that this “monoteichos” should be reported to 626 or slightly earlier, but it had not yet been completed and only refitted after the end of the Avar attack. Cf. also commentary by Speck (1980, 38–39).
 30. Van Dieten 1985, 164–165.

31. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 273, 174. However, Van Dieten (1985, 165) reckoned that this new wall should be connected to the previous mention of the palisades, which were supposed to strengthen the Theodosian Walls in selected and particularly vulnerable areas. His opinion is similar to that of Meyer-Plath and Schneider (1943, 4, n. 4).
32. A similar case is documented from the Slavic siege of Thessalonica (615 or 616). Cf. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.1.182, 176.19–25. The palisade was built by the defenders on an unfortified harbour jetty.
33. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.15–16.
34. Speck 1980, 99, n. 148; Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 173–174, n. 464. Tsangadas (1980, 91–93) wrongly considered these brachialia to be two heavily fortified areas in the middle section of the Theodosian Walls. For the Brachialion near the Golden Gate, cf. also Simeonov 2016, 139–146.
35. Prokopios *De Aedificiis*, 4.10.15, 141.24–142.3; cf. also Greatrex 1995, 125–127.
36. Agathias, 5.22.2, 192.15–19.
37. A certain Brachialion is mentioned during the later Slavic attacks on Thessalonica. According to The Miracles of Saint Demetrios (2.4.258, 215.18), the Slavs surrounded the city from the western brachialion to the eastern one. They were most probably citadels located in places where the land walls of the city met with the sea walls. Cf. Bakirtzis 1975, 316–322.
38. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 102–104 and 118; Müller-Wiener 1977, 301, and Tsangadas 1980, 29 and 100.
39. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 102. Following this, Tsangadas (1980, 97) assumed that the fortification either did not reach the Golden Horn or that this part was only poorly protected.
40. Schneider (1943, 103, n. 2) was not able to clarify this fact in a satisfactory way.
41. Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 23–24.
42. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.19–726.3.
43. *Chronicon Paschale*, 726.14–15 and apparatus criticus; Nikephoros, 13, 60.40–41; *Patria*, 3.75, 176. I also have to correct my previous arguments (2016, 239–240) regarding this topic.
44. Speck 1980, 35–36, and Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 25–26.
45. Nikephoros, 13, 58.21–23.
46. Janin 1969, 419; Tsangadas 1980, 29–32 and 192 n. 80; Philippides and Hanak 2011, 345.
47. Prokopios *De Aedificiis* 1.6.4, 29–30 (the English translation by Dewing 1971, 63).
48. Janin 1932, 406.

49. Cf. Van Millingen 1899, 168–170; Janin 1932, 404–408; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 104; Janin 1969, 369–371; Tsangadas 1980, 30; Majeska 1984, 337. In my previous conclusion, I also based my arguments on that given localization (Hurbanič 2015, 213; 2016, 237).
50. Anna Komnene, 10.9.3, 309.87–310.90.
51. Paspates 1877, 35.
52. Cf. recent important contribution by Effenberger 2017, 10–15; cf. also Schneider 1950, 106, and Philippides and Hanak 2011, 351–352.
53. *Chronicon Paschale*, 726.14–15. (the English translation by Mich. Whitby—Mar. Whitby 1989, 181).
54. *Chronicon Paschale*, 726 apparatus criticus (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 182).
55. Van Dieten 1985, 166–167.
56. Nikephoros, 13, 60.40–41.
57. *Patria*, 3.75, 176 (English translation on 177); cf. also Berger 1988, 541.
58. Speck (1980, 350) and Asutay-Effenberger (2007, 26) correctly drew attention to a liturgical record related to the Avars’ siege preserved in the Typikon of the Great Church (Hagia Sophia). It is reported there that on his way to the church of Theotokos at Blachernai, the patriarch first had to cross the Pteron. This fact clearly shows that this fortification was situated in front of the Church of Theotokos in Blachernai and it was on the way to the church. Cf. *Hagios Stauros* 40: 1, 362.25–26.
59. Asutay-Effenberger 2007, 25.
60. There are various opinions related to the delimitation and scope of this wall: Paspates 1877, 37–38; Van Millingen 1899, 166; Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 104, 121–122 and Tsangadas 1980, 27, 97, and 100; Foss and Winfield 1986, 50 and 53 and Philippides and Hanak 2011, 348.
61. In this connection, cf. the reconstruction of the original Blachernai fortification before 626, proposed by the Italian researcher A. Paribeni (1988, 217).
62. Cf. Mango 2001, 25.
63. *Chronicon Paschale*, 583.3. On that: Janin 1964, 265 (however, cf. 287 when referring to study of Grumel); Stratos 1968, 373; Berger 1988, 207; Pfeilschifter 2013, 216. Cf. also Croke 1981, 135.
64. Pfeilschifter 2013, 216.
65. Mango 2001, 24; Kislinger 2016, 91–97.
66. Grumel 1964, 225–226, 231–233.
67. Mango 2001, 24.
68. Grumel 1964, 222.
69. Cf. the chapter “Avars at the Gates”.

70. For more details on these attacks, cf. Hurbanič 2016, 246–248; Pfeilschifter 2013, 212–223.
71. John Malalas, 16, 329–332. On the possible localization of this battle: Janin 1969, 143; Külzer 2008, 301.
72. Haldon 1995, 151–152.
73. Bystrický 2003, 397–398; Ziemann 2007, 91–92, 99–100; Hurbanič 2016, 246–247.
74. Haldon 1984, 176.
75. Haldon 1984, 169.
76. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.7–10.
77. On him as a person: Pertusi 1959, 171 and Haldon 1984, 167.
78. On these units: Jones 1964, 623–614; Haldon 1984, 126, 135.
79. *Strategikon*, 12B.4, 420; cf. Haldon 1975, 23; 1999, 130.
80. *Strategikon*, 12B.5, 422; 12B.8, 426.8–7. Cf. Haldon 1975, 23; 1999, 129.
81. *Strategikon*, 1.2, 78; cf. also Haldon 1975, 21–23; 1999, 129–130.
82. *Strategikon*, 1.2, 80.35–39.
83. *Strategikon*, 1.2, 78.18–21.
84. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 295–297, 174.
85. Haldon 1984, 261 and 529.
86. *Strategikon*, 10.3, 344.32–34.
87. For previous deployments of the circus factions, cf. Al. Cameron 1976, 107; Haldon 1984, 527 and 1995, 146.
88. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.4–5.
89. Olster (1994, 68, n. 58) identifies wage mercenaries with this category.
90. George of Pisidia *In Bonum patricium*, v. 49–55, 144 and v. 111–153, 148–152.
91. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 280–287, 174.
92. Theodore Synkellos, 304.1–3.
93. Theophanes, 315.11–15 (the English translation by Mango and Scott 1997, 446).
94. In this connection, cf. Pertusi, 1959, 216–217; Stratos 1968, 373; Waldmüller 1976, 266; Tsangadas 1980, 83; Van Dieten 1985, 174; Pohl 1988, 249; Howard-Johnston 1995, 134; Kaegi 2003, 132.
95. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.11–12.
96. Copies of letters of Kyros, the Bishop of Phasis (later the patriarch of Alexandria) and the patriarch Sergios, which were transmitted without the dating formula, mention the stay of Herakleios in Lazica. Cf. Kyros *Epistula ad Sergium Constantinopolitanum*, 160, and Sergios *Epistula ad Honorium Papam*, 184. For sure, Herakleios stayed in Lazica in 627 at the time of the preparation of a final offensive against the Persians,

- whereas he apparently stayed in Pontos one year earlier. Cf. Brown, Bryer, and Winfield 1978, 30.
97. Speck 1987, 386–387.
 98. Pryor 2000, 101, and Pryor and Jeffreys 2006 123–164.
 99. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 7.10.1–7.10.3, 262.
 100. Haldon 1999, 68, and Cosentino 2007, 577.
 101. Prokopios *Bella* 3.11.15–16, 362.15–363.3. Cf. also Zuckerman 2005, 109–110 and Cosentino 2007, 580–581. However, in this case the dromons from the Justinian period would be too small; they were more like larger boats than combatant ships because of their parameters. For another interpretation of Prokopios’s report, cf. Pryor 2000, 101, n. 2, and Pryor and Jeffreys 2006, 130–132.
 102. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 276–277, 174; Zuckerman 2005, 113.
 103. Cosentino 2007, 582.
 104. *Strategikon*, 12.B.21, 468.13.
 105. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.22–723.1. Cf. also Janin 1969, 567–568; Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 177.
 106. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.15–721.3.
 107. Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 174. In this regard, cf. Lampe 1961, 1236 (a light man-of-war); cf. also Howard-Johnston 1995, 135 n. 15. (“a special type of manoeuvrable boat designed to combat the monoxyles in the enclosed waters of the Golden Horn and the Bosphorus”).
 108. Zuckerman 2005, 113.
 109. Nikephoros, 13, 58.27.
 110. In this regard, cf. John Moschos, v. 87, 3, 76, col. 2929C. Cf. also Koukoules 1951, 24 (κάραβος); Kahane, Kahane, and Tietze 1958, 780 (519 καράβι), 844 (573–574 σκάφη); Hyrkkänen and Salonen 1981, 3–7.
 111. Pryor 2000, 107; Pryor and Jeffreys 2006, 165, and 270.
 112. Zuckerman 2005, 117.
 113. *Chronicon Paschale*, 718.19–22.
 114. *Strategikon*, 3.8, 170; 3.10, 174.
 115. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 2.10.8–2.10.9, 90.
 116. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.4–5.
 117. Foss (Foss and Winfield 1986, 46) hypothetically estimates that about 10,000 men would have been needed for a sufficient occupation of the Theodosian Walls. For his calculations, cf. also n. 19, 181.
 118. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 266–277, 172, 174.
 119. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 4, n. 4.
 120. Pertusi 1959, 217.

121. Imbedded and pinched stakes of an X-shape were also used by the defenders of Thessalonica during the great attack by the Slavs (around the year 616) to protect the port, which was not protected by walls. Cf. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.1.183, 176.
122. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 291–292, 174.
123. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 275, 174.
124. Chevedden 1995, 163–164.
125. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.18–19.
126. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 18.
127. Theophanes, 384.11–12.
128. *Strategikon*, 10.3, 344.9.
129. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.152, 154–155.
130. *Strategikon*, 10.3, 344.10–12.
131. For comparison, it can be stated that before the Arab attack on Constantinople in 717, Emperor Anastasios II expelled families without sufficient private resources from the city. Cf. Theophanes, 384.
132. *Chronicon Paschale*, 711.11–15.
133. *Chronicon Paschale*, 715.9–716.8.
134. Janin 1964, 199–200; Mango 1995, 9–18, and more recently Crow, Bardill, and Bayliss 2008.
135. According to C. Mango (1995, 17), the aqueduct could not be totally put out of operation because the Avars only damaged the arcades above ground and did not completely cut off the water supply to the city. However, according to A. Berger (1988, 609), the aqueduct was unusable after the destruction of the above-ground structures and was without water.
136. For individual cisterns, cf. Crow, Bardill, and Bayliss 2008, 125–155.

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CHAPTER 8

The Avars at the Gates

At the beginning of May 626, rumours about the planned increase in the cost for civic bread began to spread in Constantinople.¹ A while earlier Herakleios had already put an end to free rations for recipients of state bread. Despite the loss of Egypt, the emperor had probably found a different source of provisions, because he managed to prevent a drastic increase in prices. The regency council possibly knew about the movements of the Persians and Avars. The commander of the military defence of the city, magister Bonos, faced an imminent and direct military attack, and therefore most likely began accumulating supplies. On 14 May, spontaneous protest of the palace guards (*scholae*) broke out in the Hagia Sophia, because John Seismos, probably the prefect of the city, planned to remove their bread rations and give it to the regular military units who had begun to move into the city.² The patriarch Sergios temporarily calmed down the *scholae*, but on the following day, even more people demanded the removal of the unpopular Seismos who also intended to raise the price of one loaf of bread from three to eight copper *folles*. Various officials, including the praetorian prefect Alexander, tried to appease the crowd again. Seismos was finally removed from his office and his official portraits were destroyed.³ Alexander promised to put everything to ensure the supply of bread at an unchanged price for the people. The government in Constantinople evidently had food reserves available, because it did not undertake any other unpopular measures, not even during the actual siege of the city.

In the meantime, the khagan's army was slowly approaching. By the beginning of June, the Avars and their allies had reached Adrianople, the last major city on their way to Constantinople. At the end of that month, the khagan decided to intimidate Constantinople's inhabitants by spreading the word that he intended to cross the Long Walls and seize everything behind them. This threat soon became a reality. On 29 June, the Avar vanguard penetrated it without any resistance and rapidly advanced towards Constantinople.⁴

On the same day, the remains of the army stationed near the Long Walls retreated to the capital along with crowds of people from the unprotected hinterland.⁵ The Avar vanguard was supposedly composed of 30,000 men. However, this number seems to be too high. While this comes from a credible military source, it is an estimate from the Roman side which cannot be verified.⁶

The Avars set up camp at Melantias, located on the famous Via Egnatia road only a short distance from Constantinople.⁷ The harvest was peaking at the time of their arrival, and some crops were still in the fields. On 8 July, some of Constantinople's citizens tried to secure these crops under the protection of troops. The regency council was trying to secure as much food as possible up to the last moment.⁸ Since the enemy did not initially appear, people gathered crops up to ten miles from the city walls.⁹ However, the Avars once again used their fearsome tactic of ambush. Huge losses were only prevented by the armed escort, which took the civilians back to the safety of the city.¹⁰ Around this time, 1000 Avar cavalrymen arrived at the Constantinople quarter of Sykai (Galata). The Avars rode up to one of the narrowest parts of Bosphorus, where the Church of the Holy Maccabees stood. The Persian forces under Shahrbaraz rallied on the other side of the straits near the town of Chrysopolis, modern-day Üsküdar, the largest of Istanbul's Anatolian suburbs. The Avars and Persians confirmed their presence to each other with light signals.¹¹

THE LAST ATTEMPT AT PEACE

These blazing flames confirmed that the Avars and the Persians had agreed on such a form of identification beforehand.¹² The khagan knew very well that he would need much more than the symbolic support of his allies from the other side of the Bosphorus to conquer Constantinople. Although the defenders of the city could not count on their emperor and his elite troops, the city walls represented a strong barrier which nobody had dared

threaten directly until now. On the other hand, the khagan had to take into account all the risks resulting from this attack. Under certain circumstances, there was even the danger of losing his laboriously gained reputation as the victorious leader of all the Transdanubian barbarians. His predecessors preferred tribute instead of undertaking risky military actions, and they used the acquired resources to strengthen their own status in the militarized Avar society. By doing this, they proved the weakness of the empire and confirmed their superiority at the same time.¹³ Up to now, the Avars had profited from the Roman problems in the east, and they were demanding higher and higher tributes without meeting any resistance. It is unlikely that the younger son of Khagan Bayan only considered the most hazardous military option to directly attack Constantinople. In the initial phase, he undoubtedly just thought about the possibility of a ransom from the city.¹⁴

The khagan sent the Roman envoy Athanasios back to Constantinople. This experienced ambassador had certainly not appeared in his camp by chance. He belonged to a close group of imperial experts on the Avars. A while earlier he and the quaestor Kosmas had negotiated a meeting between Emperor Herakleios and the khagan in Herakleia. After its failure, Athanasios definitively arranged a peace with the Avars in 623/624. Unfortunately, we do not know anything further about why Athanasios appeared in the Avar camp. However, this valuable information was stated in the original report of the siege, which has not been preserved in its entirety.

Athanasios was most probably sent to the Avars by members of the regency council of Constantinople headed by magister Bonos and patriarch Sergios. We do not know when this Roman envoy was assigned this mission, but it was certainly before the arrival of the Avar vanguard in the immediate vicinity of the city. When Athanasios came back to capital, he learned about the advanced state of siege preparations. The members of the council informed him that during his absence the walls had been repaired and strengthened, and that more military reinforcements had come to the city.¹⁵ This means that Athanasios must have been absent from Constantinople for a longer period, at least for a month or more, during which time such measures could have been implemented.¹⁶ It is possible he had set out to meet the Avars at the beginning of their military expedition in the early spring months of 626.¹⁷ The extensive preparations for such a massive attack and the concentration of troops certainly would not have escaped the attention of numerous Roman spies. The regency

council could have entrusted Athanasios with this embassy even at the time when the first news of the Avar movements appeared. Athanasios arrived at the Avar camp to ascertain the conditions under which the khagan would abandon plans to attack the city. When the khagan set up camp close to Adrianople, he sent him back to Constantinople with the following request: “Go and see how the people of the city are willing to conciliate me and what they are willing to give me to make me retire.”¹⁸

This terse message indicates that the mutual conversations only referred to a tribute, because at that time the Avar leader was not yet imposing any ultimate demands on having the city surrender. In this way, he was giving the impression that he was not interested in conquering it. After all, the Avars often preferred a ransom over the risk of a longer siege. Theodore Synkellos accused the khagan of greediness, which could indicate that the Avars had asked for a further increase in the tribute.¹⁹

Probably in the middle of July, Athanasios went back to Constantinople, where a surprise awaited him. The members of the council who had entrusted him with the embassy now reproached him for promising the khagan financial compensation. However, Athanasios defended himself and claimed that his conciliatory attitude towards the Avars was not his own wilful initiative but rather a proper fulfilment of the instructions of the regency council.²⁰ In his defence, he stated that during his absence he had not had any information of the measures that had taken place in the city. He did not know that reinforcements had come to Constantinople and that the people had fortified the walls.²¹ This means that something altering the course of events must have taken place. The regency council was originally inclined towards making concessions to the Avars and did not wish to have a direct confrontation with them. Probably the advocates for peace, who apparently formed a majority in the council at the time, entrusted Athanasios with finding out the circumstances of a possible agreement with the enemy. The khagan did not reject this idea entirely but did not propose that any particular conditions be met. However, during Athanasios's stay in the Avar camp, a legation sent by the Emperor Herakleios reached Constantinople, probably on ships, and it was most likely accompanied by some reinforcements.

The next steps of the regents were determined by instructions preserved in the form of an official dispatch sent by Herakleios. This document is only briefly mentioned by Theodore Synkellos, while George of Pisidia summarized its content, albeit in purely rhetorical fashion.²² Nevertheless, from his description it is clear that the emperor ordered to

take all available steps to secure the defence of the city. Probably, he did so after the victory over the Persian army of Shahen as a result of which he promised the rapid arrival of reinforcements under the command of his brother Theodore.²³

These circumstances unquestionably influenced the attitude of the regency council. Athanasios rightfully rejected the reproaches made towards him, but as a diplomat he had agreed that he would inform the khagan about the entire matter. Before returning to the Avar camp, he wanted to see the military strength of Constantinople for himself. On this initiative, a quickly summoned military muster was held during which approximately 12,000 cavalymen assembled in front of this Roman envoy.²⁴ The credibility of this fact depends on whether it is seen in the context of Athanasios's embassy to the Avars or as information intended for Emperor Herakleios. In the case of the first possibility, this could, of course, be an intentional exaggeration of the number of military forces by the regents to improve Athanasios's negotiating position against the khagan.²⁵ However, a lot of factors suggest that this report was part of a diplomatic dispatch to the emperor himself, and its compositors would have had no reason to overstate the numbers of troops in such official document.

Members of the regency council then summoned Athanasios once more "to cause the accursed Chagan to approach the wall, that is the city".²⁶ Was the envoy supposed to provoke the khagan to attack?²⁷ Were the regents really so sure of their position that they would resort to such extreme measures? If so, how can their constant effort towards reaching a peaceful outcome during the siege be explained? Even on 2 August, the commander of the city Bonos was trying to appease the Avars with the promise of a ransom. Therefore, it can be supposed that in this case, there was some damage to the preserved text of the report of the Avar siege. It probably originally stated that Athanasios was supposed to do everything so that the Avars would not reach the city. This attitude seems to be more understandable. Athanasios had the task of playing for time and trying to appease the khagan with vague promises. He left Constantinople around the second half of July 626. When he came to the vicinity of Adrianople, where the Avars still had their camp, the enraged khagan refused to see him; this was probably because in the meantime he had established contact with Shahrbaraz's Persian troops. Although the Persians were encouraging the khagan to attack, this did not have to mean that he could not deal with both parties and accept the better offer. However, this time Athanasios was not promising anything. If he wanted to save face, the khagan had to

put all his eggs in one basket and attempt to conquer Constantinople. As Athanasios informed the officials, “The cursed Chagan said that he would not give way at all unless he obtained both the city and those who were in it.”²⁸

The khagan prepared to join up with the Persians. Even if he had arrived at the Bosphorus earlier than he did, he would not have been able to secure mutual coordination with his allies. Since the Roman naval patrols had been prepared to protect the strait for some time, the Avars had no other option than to try to conquer Constantinople with their own forces.

THE AVARS AT THE GATES

The bulk of Avar forces with their khagan appeared in front of Constantinople on Tuesday, 29 July, and on the same day, they presented themselves in full strength to the defenders of the city.²⁹ The terrified inhabitants watched the closed ranks of the barbarians demonstratively marching in shiny armour before the terrestrial Theodosian Walls.³⁰

The depressing psychological impact of this did not remain without response. The patriarch Sergios organized a spectacular procession along the city walls on the same day. In the presence of clergy and the majority of the population, he showed the enemy an image of Christ the Saviour which had not been made with human hands.³¹ The khagan tentatively settled for a military parade, and when evening came he retreated to his quickly built camp.

In the following days, the khagan had earthworks built around the camp and a palisade made which served to protect the invaders against raiders from the city.³² The existence of such defences contradicts the contemporary information from Roman military intelligence, which clearly stated that Avars and nomads did not usually camp behind entrenchments.³³ According to Theodore Synkellos, the Avars also protected their camp with *triboloi*.³⁴ These were probably iron caltrops with spikes on top which were scattered in front of the camp to prevent anticipated attacks by cavalry.³⁵ Another form of protection for the besiegers was probably the wagon fort.³⁶

The elite part of the Avar army took up their positions in the Lykos Valley. The khagan did not choose this place by chance. It was generally known that this central area was the weakest part of the Theodosian land walls due to the descending terrain and the lower level of the walls

themselves.³⁷ In addition, from the hillocks facing opposite, the khagan had an adequate view of operations taking place along the whole length of the walls, including in the strategically important Golden Horn.³⁸

Shahrbaraz's Persian army took up their positions on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. By its mere presence, it increased psychological pressure on the defenders, who had to deploy almost every available ship to patrol the strait. On the second day of the siege, 30 July, the khagan began preparing an attack on the city. The Avars had brought in wooden parts which they used for constructing their traction catapults. Other groups made movable shelters, known as "turtles", which filled the area before the city. Already at that time, the Avars' allies—the Slavs—had tried to launch their canoes hollowed from the single trunk of a tree into the Golden Horn, but the Roman ships had prevented this.³⁹ The khagan was probably trying to get these boats to the vulnerable edge of the wall of Blachernai and to the weakly protected adjacent coastline.

The khagan sent messengers to the city asking for food and the inhabitants of the city complied with this unusual request. This is all rather surprising to a certain extent. The further development of the siege brought moments in which almost unusual cruelty was mixed with gallantry; threats and intimidation were combined with gestures of conciliation. Both sides made use of every possible means, including psychological weaponry, boastful propaganda, and camouflage. According to Theodore Synkellos, the young emperor and regent Herakleios Constantine did send food to the khagan and attached an offer of peace. The symbolical hand of Bonos, the real military commander of the city, was behind these proposals. After the arrival of the Avars, he "did not cease from urging him to take not only his agreed tribute but also any other condition for the sake of which he had come as far as the wall".⁴⁰ What was the khagan asking for? First of all, he probably demanded annual tribute of 200,000 solidi, which was a key condition of the last Roman–Avar treaty from the turn of 623/624. Other requirements probably included further compensation to the Avars in exchange for them stopping their attack.

At this stage, however, the khagan was not willing to accede to anything other than the voluntary surrender of Constantinople. He then boastfully announced to its inhabitants: "Withdraw from the city, leave me your property, and save yourselves and your families."⁴¹ The khagan's standpoint was conveyed by Theodore Synkellos in the following matter:

“He took the food, he heard the emperor’s words, but still he remained the same furious and barking dog he had been before.”⁴²

At dawn on 31 July, the khagan ordered an attack. “There appeared a war-trumpet and spears, swords, fire, turtles, fast-falling stones, and the machines and devices of the false towers,” wrote poetically George of Pisidia.⁴³ The Avars concentrated their main attack between the Polyandrion and Pempton Gates.⁴⁴ In the middle of them was the Gate of Saint Romanos, which represented the symbolical key to the city. If the Avars had seized it, they would have reached the centre of Constantinople by the adjacent main street.

The attack was commenced by “naked Slavs”—the light foot soldiers equipped with spears, swords, and bows.⁴⁵ The Slavic front line probably had ladders at their disposal as well. What was their role? Were the Slavs mere “cannon fodder”?⁴⁶ Were they supposed to tire out the defenders of the city before the attack of the Avars’ elite forces? This was probably the case as other armies—including the Ottoman Turks, who besieged Constantinople in 1422 and 1453—used such “less valuable units” as well. Some assume that the Slavs were supposed to fill up the moat and secure the strongpoints by the walls. The movable shelters—the turtles—were probably helpful in this endeavour.⁴⁷

After the attack of the “naked” Slavs, the khagan sent the heavy infantry against the walls. From the context of the source, it is not clear which group comprised this part of his army. The official report only states that the khagan first attacked with the infantry of the naked Slavs and then with heavy infantry in the second line.⁴⁸ The second line, composing of heavy infantry, probably comprised Avars, although the deployment of Bulgars and even Slavs here cannot be ruled out.⁴⁹

In the meantime, other Slavs attacked in the northern and southern sectors. These operations were probably just a concealing manoeuvre which was supposed to engage the defenders and prevent them from helping the most endangered parts of the walls in the area of the Lykos Valley.⁵⁰ These were probably different Slavs than the “naked” light infantry, who probably formed the Avar vanguard in the central part of the walls.⁵¹ But sometimes during this day, the Roman defence made a surprise attack in the southern sector of the walls and surprised the unsuspecting invaders placed there, who were probably Slavs.⁵² They were apparently concentrated in an area one kilometre from the Pege Gate, where there was an important monastery and place of pilgrimage consecrated to the Mother

of God alongside a healing spring (after which the gate had got its name).⁵³ It is possible that the Slavs used the monastery during the siege and had set up camp inside it.

The Roman attack proved successful. However, the exact details of this operation are unknown. Theodore Synkellos presents this episode with his already legendary touch. According to him, it was the Virgin Mary herself who had created a trap for the barbarians and “killed them with the hands of Christian fighters”.⁵⁴ The official report on the siege does not mention this operation at all; therefore, the importance of this sortie should be judged more from a psychological point of view since it encouraged the defenders to fight on and convinced them of the vulnerability of the enemy.

The khagan continued attacking the walls until 5 pm. However, this was all just a testing manoeuvre assessing the weak points of defence. According to Theodore Synkellos, “various skirmishes in different areas, shooting, and stone throwing along the whole length of the walls was happening.”⁵⁵ In the evening, the Avars positioned their catapults in front of the gates which, as was tradition, they covered with fire-protecting wet hides; they set up their “turtles” as well. They arranged these weapons from Brachialion to Brachialion, in other words, from the northern to the southern promontory of the whole western city walls.⁵⁶

Around this time, the Avars finished building their siege towers, which they intended to use the following day. The building of these towers was probably not that difficult and took place very quickly. Theodore Synkellos observed that this activity was carried out by many barbarians who had a sufficient amount of material. The khagan had supposedly taken wood from houses he had destroyed in outlying areas before bringing the wood in on wagons.⁵⁷ The degree of preparation in the Avar camp suggested that the main attack was only about to commence.

THE FIRST ATTACK ON THE CITY

On the following day, on 1 August, the Avars executed their first major attempt to conquer the city. They stationed many catapults and other siege devices in the central part of the Theodosian Walls and they tried to expel the defenders from the battlements by firing at them. The hail of stones must have been intense, because Roman soldiers had to deploy a lot of their own artillery between the two lines of the Theodosian Walls.⁵⁸ However, the defenders successfully kept the Avars and their

allies at distance with precisely aimed fire.⁵⁹ In the next phase, the khagan threw twelve movable wooden towers, called *pyrgokastelloi*, into the attack. He ordered to position them in the central part of Theodosian Walls in the area between the Polyandrion Gate and the Gate of Saint Romanos. The height of each wooden tower almost reached the battlements of the outer wall.⁶⁰ The Avars could easily push the towers towards the walls due to the mildly descending terrain of the Lykos Valley.⁶¹

The situation became critical for the defenders. They were quickly joined by sailors from the crews of ships guarding the Golden Horn. The towers were slowly moving towards the gates. However, when they got close, they were allegedly suddenly destroyed by a divine power—at least according to the later source used by the patriarch Nikephoros.⁶² The miraculous interpretation of this attack, however, also considerably influenced those who witnessed it. Theodore Synkellos stated that God was laughing at the khagan and mocking his efforts.⁶³ What exactly happened? It is certain that when the towers got close to the walls, the defenders sought to destroy or at least stop them. One unnamed sailor distinguished himself in this activity; he had helped strengthen the defence of the central area of Theodosian Walls, and he constructed a device with the purpose of destroying one of the towers.⁶⁴

What did this look like? A. Mordtman suggests that it was composed of small wooden cartridges in the shape of a boat which were attached to the tip of a long hook. They should contain an inflammable mixture which was supposed to be the feared “Greek fire”.⁶⁵ However, the official report explicitly states that the device used by the sailor was in fact a boat.⁶⁶ Furthermore, the mention of “Greek fire”—a destructive Byzantine weapon—is before its time. The device was probably not even the “*malleoli*”: the burning arrowheads which were immersed in an inflammable mixture.⁶⁷

The sailor probably used his knowledge and skills with working with a pulley, a boom, and ropes, and managed to create a kind of crane with a small skiff filled with an inflammable mixture hanging at its end.⁶⁸ The defenders turned this improvised crane towards the Avar tower by means of pulleys and ropes. Then they either released the skiff and let it fall down onto the tower or emptied the inflammable mixture which was stored inside it. Such a mechanism has surely no parallel in late antique “*polior-ketic*” warfare.⁶⁹ Only the Roman defenders of Martyropolis constructed a similar device against a Persians in 531. According to the Syrian chronicler John Malalas, they used a machine to drop a column which “smashed

everything to the ground and killed many Persians at the same time”.⁷⁰ However, similar devices are known from the later mediaeval period. During the siege of Lisbon in 1147, the Arab defenders of the city tried to destroy the siege tower of the Crusaders in the same way as in 626. As the tower approached the wall, they hurled down skiffs filled with inflammable material.⁷¹ A similar mechanism was used by the Muslim defenders of Tyre during the attack of King Baldwin I of Jerusalem in the winter of 1111 and 1112. Similarly, as during the Avar siege, it was an unnamed sailor who used his technical skills to construct a sort of crane. The Muslim defenders erected a huge beam on the city bastion, on top of which they set another beam crosswise. The whole construction resembled the mast of a sailing ship. As the author of this report further states, “At one end of this rotating crosspiece was an arrow of iron, and at the other end were ropes arranged round about it as the man in charge desired. He (the sailor) used to hoist on this contrivance jars of filth and impurities, in order to distract them (the Franks) from ramming by upsetting the contents over them on the towers.”⁷² In the next phase of the siege, the defenders substituted excrement with an inflammable mixture composed of oil, pitch, kindling wood, resin, and peelings of cane.⁷³

The unknown hero of the Avar siege earned the praise of Bonos for his counter-strategy. We know that this sailor “dismayed the enemy not inconsiderably”.⁷⁴ He probably damaged the tower with the help of his fellow combatants but did not manage to destroy it entirely. There are no reports on what happened to the remaining eleven siege towers. Nonetheless, the defenders saw off the attackers and made the khagan withdraw his towers from the walls.

THE ATTACK OF THE MONOXYLES

The first major attack of the Avars and their allies ended at dawn on 1 August.⁷⁵ Although the defenders managed to fend it off, the khagan was successful in one tactical point: he had managed to launch the Slavic monoxyles into the waters of the Golden Horn. The previous attempts had been unsuccessful due to the city vessels called *skaphokaraboi* which were concentrated eastwards of the monoxyles in the Golden Horn.⁷⁶ The khagan probably surprised this naval force, as the majority of its crews had to have been helping the defenders in the central section of the Theodosian Walls. According to the official report, the khagan had the monoxyles

launched underneath the Bridge of Saint Kallinikos.⁷⁷ This bridge was without doubt located just a kilometre away from Blachernai and near the Monastery of Saints Kosmas and Damianos in the area known later as Kosmidion, which corresponds to today's Istanbul suburb of *Eyüp*. The given locality was not random; it is one of the narrowest parts of the Golden Horn (Fig. 8.1).⁷⁸

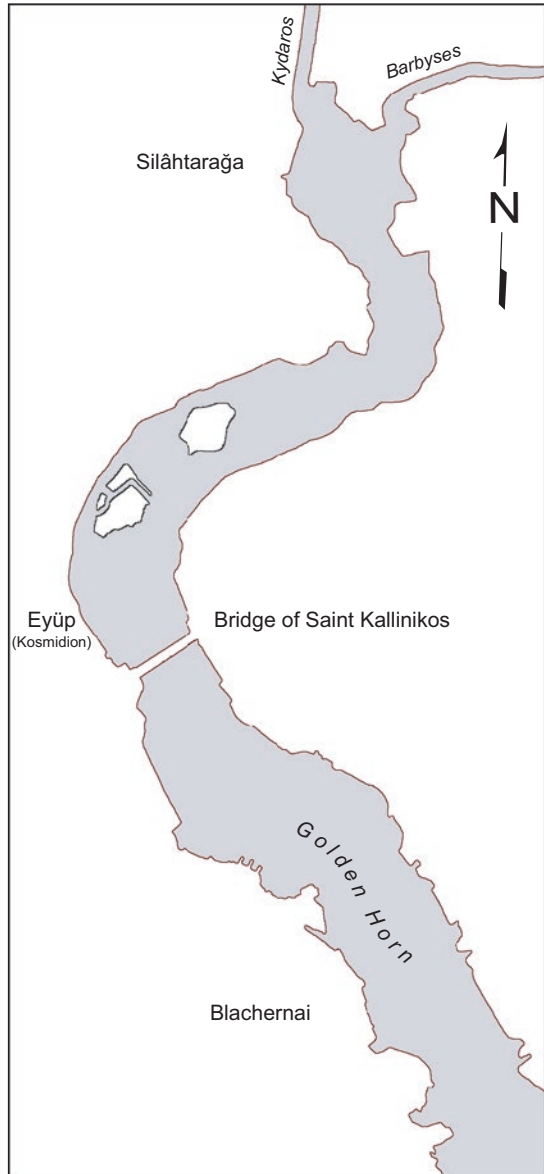
According to the official report, the city vessels, the *skaphokaraboi*, were positioned “within sight” (εἰς ὄψιν) of the Slavic dug-out boats.⁷⁹ Therefore, this bridge could not possibly have been located at the far end of the Golden Horn as previously assumed, because in that case the Roman naval patrols would have had no chance of spotting their enemy, which would have been perfectly covered by a nearby hill. Moreover, the monoxyles being positioned in such a large distance would have posed no threat to the defenders of Constantinople; they would have been literally kilometres away from the walls.

The commander of the city's defence magister Bonos could not take any preliminary action against the monoxyles, because the khagan had cleverly positioned the boats in shallow waters that were inaccessible for the Romans' heavier vessels. As an illustration, the depth of the Golden Horn in today's Istanbul quarter of Ayvansaray is only about 2–3 metres deep.⁸⁰

THE NAVAL DEFENCE

After the monoxyles had assumed their positions at the Bridge of Saint Kallinikos, the captains of the *skaphokaraboi* could only patrol the Golden Horn. These ships were stretched along the Golden Horn from the Church of Saint Nicholas to the Church of Saint Konon. The first of these was located near the waters of the Golden Horn in front of the Blachernai wall.⁸¹ The other end of the naval defences was delimited by the Church of Saint Konon, located on the boundary of the Constantinople districts of Pegai and Sykai near the Golden Horn.⁸² The latter became in fact the separate city during the reign of the Emperor Justinian and encircled with a separate wall.⁸³ Based on this localization it is very likely that the Roman ships (*skaphokaraboi*) created a sort of stretched-out chain, filling a relatively large part of the Golden Horn. This position must have had a meaning—if the patrols only wanted to prevent the monoxyles from sailing across the gulf towards Constantinople, it would have sufficed to cover the area in a direct line from north to south (Fig. 8.2).

Fig. 8.1 The localization of the Bridge of Saint Kallinikos; map by Ivan Varšo



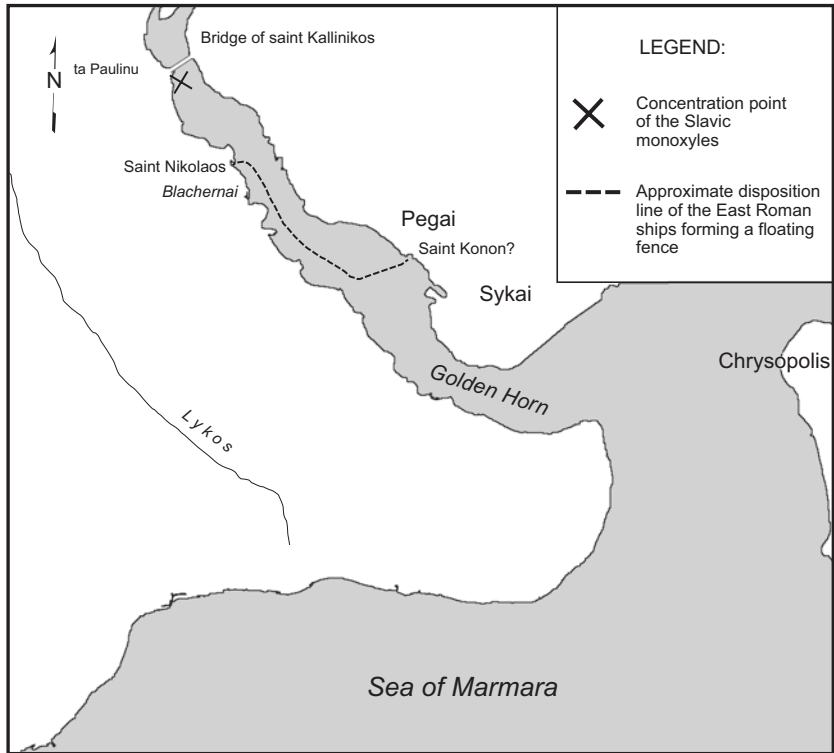


Fig. 8.2 The approximate line of *skaphokaraboi* in the Golden Horn; map by Ivan Varšo

The ships had to guard this position thoroughly to prevent the enemy from bypassing the Brachialion, which was the end of the wall of Blachernai. It is therefore very likely that both mentioned churches, the Saint Nicholas and the Saint Konon, created a sort defence of Constantinople with the adjacent fortifications of Blachernai and Sykai connected by the line of *skaphokaraboi* which were tied to each other.⁸⁴ A similar method of naval defence can be documented during the siege of Thessalonica by the Slavs, usually dated to 615 or 616. The Slavs tried to invade the city from the sea through the unprotected harbour of Kellarion.⁸⁵ According to report preserved in Miracles of Saint Demetrios, the defenders of Thessalonica created a double barrier in the unprotected area of that harbour. The first line

of defence was a chain in the sea which barred entry to the port. The second line consisted of cargo ships which were tied to each other. Since the jetty of Kellarion was also unprotected, the defenders of Thessalonica had to quickly build a wooden palisade which would prevent the Slavs from landing in this section.⁸⁶

When considering all the circumstances of the Avar siege, the *skapho-karaboi* could not have stood in the Golden Horn without additional measures. Had there been no additional barrier on the opposite side of the bay, the Slavs and Avars could have seriously threatened the free-standing ships from the northern shore of the Golden Horn. Let us also consider the relatively small width of the Golden Horn and the difficult manoeuvrability of these vessels. The most effective defence against a flank attack by the monoxyles was a barrier which had to be attached to some other fortified places, otherwise it would not make sense. This fact is clearly demonstrated at the siege of Thessalonica, where the cargo ships were connected to the palisade which was used to protect the adjacent pier.

NOTES

1. A different dating has been suggested by Ericsson (1968, 17–28), but cf. Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 201–202.
2. *Chronicon Paschale*, 715.9–13. Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 169, n. 456. These new recipients of the state bread (*Chronicon Paschale* 715.13) probably belonged to the units stationed at the suburbs of Constantinople (cf. *Chronicon Paschale* 717.1–10).
3. *Chronicon Paschale*, 716.1–2.
4. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.7–9.
5. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.1–10.
6. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.5.
7. Howard-Johnston 1995, 138.
8. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.11–22.
9. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.13–16.
10. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.22–718.2.
11. *Chronicon Paschale*, 718.2–4; Theodore Synkellos, 304.31–35.
12. Speck 1987, 384.
13. Cf. Pohl 1988, 209–215.
14. *Chronicon Paschale*, 718.4–719.4. cf. Speck 1987, 385.
15. *Chronicon Paschale*
16. Stratos 174, 183; Speck 1987, 388–389.

17. Stratos 1968, 174; Kaegi 2003, 133.
18. *Chronicon Paschale*, 718.7–9 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 172).
19. Theodore Synkellos, 301.13–14.
20. *Chronicon Paschale*, 718.13–15.
21. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.1–718.18.
22. Cf. the chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
23. The members of the regency council had information of the arrival of the rescuing army, as it is clear from the negotiations between the khagan and the embassy dispatched to him on 2 August. Cf. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.1–4. cf. also Speck 1987, 389.
24. *Chronicon Paschale*, 718.19–22.
25. Howard-Johnston 1995, 134, n. 10.
26. *Chronicon Paschale*, 718.23–719.1 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 172).
27. Howard-Johnston 1995, 135.
28. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.3–4 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 172).
29. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.4–7; Theodore Synkellos, 305.21–28.
30. Theodore Synkellos, 305.21–26.
31. Theodore Synkellos, 304.36–305.12; George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 66–379, 178, 180.
32. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.2; 725.4; 725.1.
33. *Strategikon*, 11.2, 362.32–33. Cf. McCotter 1996, 207.
34. Theodore Synkellos, 312.12.
35. *Strategikon*, 4.3. 196.35–36.
36. The wagons are documented during the siege of 626 as a part of the military equipment of the attackers. Cf. Theodore Synkellos, 306.17; 312.33. For the use of wagons by the Slavs and Avars: Theophylaktos Simokattes, 7.2.4–7.2.11, 247–248. and 7.11.7, 264.
37. Cf. the chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
38. Howard-Johnston 1995, 139.
39. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.15–17.
40. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.10–13 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 174).
41. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.14–15 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 174).
42. Theodore Synkellos, 305.34–36.
43. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 220–222, 170.
44. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.9–10.
45. For other examples of nudity during the battle: Pohl 1998, 45, n. 125.

46. For the use of scaling ladders by the Slavs and Avars during the sieges of Thessalonica in 586 and 618, cf. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.13.119, 135 and 2.2.203, 186.
47. Tsangadas 1980, 89.
48. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.12–14.
49. Cf. Grafenauer 1950, 110; Kollautz—Miyakawa 1970: 1, 240; Barišić 1955, 147; Angelov—Kašev—Čolpanov 1983, 122; Kazanski 2015, 46.
50. Theodore Synkellos, 305.37–38.
51. Ivanov 1995, 80; Curta 2001, 109.
52. Theodore Synkellos, 305.38–306.7; cf. Barišić 1954, 381.
53. Theodore Synkellos, 306.1–2. On this monastery: Janin 1969, 223–228; Berger 1988, 686.
54. Theodore Synkellos, 306.1–2.
55. Theodore Synkellos, 306.7–8.
56. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.15–16. Cf. the chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
57. Theodore Synkellos, 306.14–18.
58. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.16–19.
59. *Chronicon Paschale*, 719.19–21.
60. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.2–3. Cf. also Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 12.
61. Cf. the chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
62. Nikephoros 13, 58.16–19.
63. Theodore Synkellos, 306.18–19.
64. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.7–9.
65. Mordtmann 1903, 17.
66. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.5–6.
67. Tevyashov 1914, 232.
68. Pohl 1988, 230; Nicolle 2003, 23; Pertusi 1959, 203.
69. Even the famous *tolleno* (a sort of crane) made by Archimedes was able to drop a large amount of stones on the attacking Roman ships during the siege of Syracuse. Cf. Lendle 1983, 121–127.
70. John Malalas, 18.66, 392.64–65 (the English translation according to E. Jeffreys, M. Jeffreys, and Scott 1986, 274).
71. *De expugnatione Lyxbonensi*, 162.
72. Ibn al-Qalanisi, 124.
73. Ibn al-Qalanisi, 124–125.
74. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.5–9 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 174).
75. That incident is only briefly mentioned by Barišić 1954, 382–383 and note 1; Stratos 1968, 185–186; Tsangadas, 1980, 89–90; Howard-Johnston 1995, 139.

76. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.15–19. For a *skaphokaraboi*, cf. chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
77. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.18.
78. For the localization of this bridge cf. Hurbanič 2012, 15–24, cf. also one important correction of my conclusions by Effenberger (2018, 157–176).
79. *Chronicon Paschale*, 720.21–721.1.
80. Meyer-Plath and Schneider 1943, 102.
81. For its localization cf. chapter “The Fortress Constantinople”.
82. John Malalas, 15.14, 315.66 and 18.13, 360.49. For this church, cf. Janin 1969, 282–284.
83. *Notitia Urbis Constantinopolitanae*, 240 (regio Sycena); *Chronicon Paschale*, 618.14–19.
84. Cf. in detail Hurbanič 2015, 2011–220.
85. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.1.182, 176.19–25.
86. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii* 2.1.184, 176.30–31.

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The Final Solution

On the evening of 2 August, the khagan requested an embassy from the city and temporarily stopped hostilities. Bonos presumably thought about negotiating the withdrawal of the enemy and entrusted the leadership of this delegation to patrician George, whose name appears as the first in the protocol. He must have been one of the most distinguished officials of the city; however, there is no trace of his activities prior to the Avar siege. The second most notable person was the financial official (*kommerkiarios*) Theodore, who also led negotiations with the khagan after the end of the siege. The third listed member was another financial official—patrician and logothetes Theodosios. In addition, the “Avar expert” Athanasios was also present. He had personally negotiated with the khagan on several occasions over the preceding three years. However, this time he was not formally the head of the embassy because the protocol presents his name as last on the list.¹

The patriarch Sergios had also his own man—Theodore Synkellos—in the delegation. He is generally believed to have produced a contemporary homily of the siege written probably one year after this event. If this was so, then Theodore was describing his own feelings when he entered the khagan’s tent: “We saw a terrestrial Proteos, a demon in human form whose word is unstable, his appearance and character terrible. Ah! the filth of his body and clothing—which we saw—ah! his words—which we heard –, we feel sick to speak to you about him and we are afraid of him. Like a second

Salmoneos, he tattoos his skin below, thinks nothing of the future, and never reasons justly.”²

Theodore was a cleric and a member of the patriarch’s staff, but in his description of the khagan he used traditional motifs from Greek mythology, which was still a part of the education of the local elites.³ Like the Avar khagan, the Thessalian king Salmoneos had become a symbol of arrogance. He had even decided to emulate Zeus’s heavenly power. Synkellos was not making this comparison by chance. Salmoneos eventually paid for his pride with an almighty punishment sent from the heavens. Likewise, the khagan faced a miraculous defeat in the Golden Horn. The comparison to the unkind old man Proteos was also intended as he was associated with moodiness and volatility of thought, just like the envoys experienced from the khagan in his camp.

When they presented their gifts, the Avar leader triumphantly showed them three Persian dignitaries in precious silk robes. They had been sent by Shahrbaraz, who was still camped on the Asian shore of the Bosphorus. As George of Pisidia would floridly state, “The impudent Persian is once again treacherously sending sea thieves as emissaries.”⁴ How the Persians had managed to cross the strait remains a mystery. The Roman ambassadors knew even then that the khagan was in no mood to negotiate. He humiliated them by leaving them to stand while telling his Persian allies to sit by him.⁵ He then pompously told the delegation: “Look, the Persians have sent an embassy to me and are ready to give me three thousand men in alliance.”⁶

After making this threat, the khagan then softened his tone and appeared to make a last concessive gesture: if the inhabitants of Constantinople wanted to avoid annihilation, they would have to leave the city. They would be allowed to live if they left with no possessions and crossed to the Asian side of Bosphorus. If they consented to this agreement, the khagan promised he would agree with Shahrbaraz on having their lives spared. “Cross over to him, and he will not harm you,” said the khagan confidently. “Leave me your city and property. For otherwise it is impossible for you to be saved, unless you can become fish and depart by sea, or birds and ascend to the sky.”⁷

The self-assured khagan tried to terrify the Roman envoys. The Persians had informed him that Emperor Herakleios remained passive and inactive, and therefore the city could not expect any military reinforcements from him.⁸ However, the leader of the Roman delegation, George, was not taken in by this and accused the Persians of lying and treachery right to the

khagan's face. "These men are imposters and do not speak a word of truth, since our army is arrived here and our most pious lord is in their country utterly destroying it," he said in reply.⁹ George's words caused the Persians to voice their displeasure. One of them even started to verbally abuse him. While he had been agitated by the mention of reinforcements, he was particularly outraged by the mention of the Roman offensive in Persia, which was a totally unsubstantiated allegation. Herakleios's whereabouts were unknown, but he was certainly not in Persia. George then told the Persian envoy that he was not offended by his words but rather by the behaviour of the Avar leader.¹⁰ One can only wonder how he said this in the khagan's presence. The Romans were also playing a psychological game and teasing the khagan, pointing out the considerable size of the Avar army and the inability of the khagan to conquer the city on his own: "Although you have such great hordes, you need Persian help."¹¹ But the khagan left this accusation without a response and he again highlighted his alliance with Shahrbaraz.¹² Why in the end did he finally reject proposals for peace? Did he think that the situation for the city was really that desperate?

George and his men did not let themselves be intimidated and resolutely opposed the voluntary surrender of Constantinople. They surely knew about the arrival of the Roman army under Theodore, the brother of Herakleios. George stressed that they were commissioned only to discuss the issue of ending the siege in return for a ransom. The khagan declared further talks to be pointless and dismissed them.¹³

THE FATE OF THE PERSIAN EMISSARIES

The Roman ambassadors announced the content of negotiations to the members of the regency council. Theodore Synkellos stated that the khagan "threatened us and said that if we do not leave the city quickly, tomorrow we would see the Persian troops before the city walls".¹⁴ He added: "Indeed, we saw for ourselves that the Persians which had been sent by Shahrbaraz had brought gifts and wanted to reach an agreement on them sending Slavic canoes which could transport the Persian army over from Chalcedon."¹⁵

For the defenders, this was a grave warning. The Bosphorus is quite expansive and even though it was guarded by many vessels, the cover of darkness could allow the khagan to successfully carry out this plan. The very presence of the Persian envoys in the Avar camp indicated that the

naval blockade was not fully effective. Presumably after receiving this information, Bonos strengthened the naval patrols even more.

The participation of the Persians in the siege depended on the ability of the khagan to ensure transportation across the Bosphorus. The negotiations between both parties could have been more intensive despite the constant Roman guarding of the strait. Synkellos evaluated the Avar–Persian alliance more from a psychological perspective than a military one: “The barbarian requested the Persian forces, not because of a need for their alliance, as the earth and sea have been filled with wild peoples upon his command; rather, he wanted to show us his unanimity and agreement with the Persians.”¹⁶

Was the khagan planning to use his allies in only a symbolic manner in the upcoming military operations? Three thousand men were not that many—at least in terms of modern criteria. However, the khagan clearly used this number as a piece of propaganda and a means of threatening Constantinople, which meant that the promised reinforcements would have to be substantial.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Persians were masters in siege warfare, and it is possible that the khagan really wanted their expertise.

The Avar leader prepared an answer for Shahrbaraz and sent the Persian envoys on their way. These men faced the difficult task of getting back across to the Asian shore. On the night of 2–3 August, they made their way to Chalai (today’s Bebek) on the European side of the Bosphorus. From there they intended to cross over to Chrysopolis at one of the narrowest parts of the strait. Before departing, they split up. One envoy managed to get on board a small boat known as a *sandalos*. He had presumably paid off a local sailor before hiding himself in the boat under a thick layer of coverings.

However, as the boat approached some Roman vessels, the local sailor adroitly signalled their crews, which included members of the city orphanages.¹⁸ As soon as the guards threw back the coverings, they found the Persian, who had been lying face down underneath.¹⁹ Other Roman guards intercepted the remaining two Persians, who had been trying to return in another boat.²⁰ According to normal diplomatic practices, all three prisoners should have been spared. However, in this conflict such treatment had not been exercised for some time. The first envoy was slain in the boat, while the remaining two were taken to the city. A morning surprise was prepared for the khagan. One of the remaining envoys had both hands cut off and the head of his decapitated compatriot fixed to his throat.²¹ This unfortunate dignitary was then sent to the khagan. The

Persians had dared to insult Emperor Herakleios, who they did not recognize as a legitimate ruler, and such a stance could not go without a response.

The remaining Persian envoy was taken to the Asian shore of the Bosphorus, where Shahrbaraz was camped. He was shown to the Persian army before being decapitated and thrown onto the shore. To confuse them completely, the body had a letter attached to it which falsely stated: “The Chagan, after making terms with us, sent us the ambassadors who were dispatched to him by you; we have beheaded two of them in the city, while look! You have the head of the other.”²²

During that Sunday, 3 August, the khagan went to Chalai, where the Persian envoys had tried to cross over to the Asian side. On this place, the Slavs had presumably collected a large number of monoxyles to help the Persian soldiers to cross the strait. This concentration of forces did not go unnoticed by the patrolling Roman vessels. That very evening, Bonos sent around seventy boats to the strait. The sailors were obstructed by the approaching darkness and particularly the head wind.²³ The Slavic monoxyles evaded the Roman naval defence at dawn. Presumably they used their key advantages: a quiet means of movement on water and the expansive nature of the Bosphorus.

In the evening, the khagan went to the city walls. The Roman magistrates symbolically paid tribute to him by sending food and wine. One of the Avar dignitaries, a man named Hermitzis, came to an unnamed gate and criticized the defenders for killing the Persian envoys. The defenders did not pay much heed to this complaint and told Hermitzis that they could not care less about the khagan’s concerns.²⁴

The fate of the Avar–Persian alliance was supposed to have been decided at sea. The Slavic canoes avoided the Roman naval patrols and landed on the Asian bank of the Bosphorus. Their skill was underlined by Theodore Synkellos: “The Slavs have been courageous and very experienced in sailing at sea since they rose up against the Roman Empire.”²⁵ The monoxyles started at Chrysopolis. On the way back, however, the skilful Slavic rowers had no such luck. They were blocked by the Roman ships, and a bloody sea battle ensued. Unfortunately, there is only limited information about what happened. Theodore Synkellos only laconically stated: “God put an obstacle in the passing of the Persians to this dog (khagan), preparing an ambush for them, and by killing some of those which were sent by the tyrants to each other.” (Fig. 9.1)²⁶

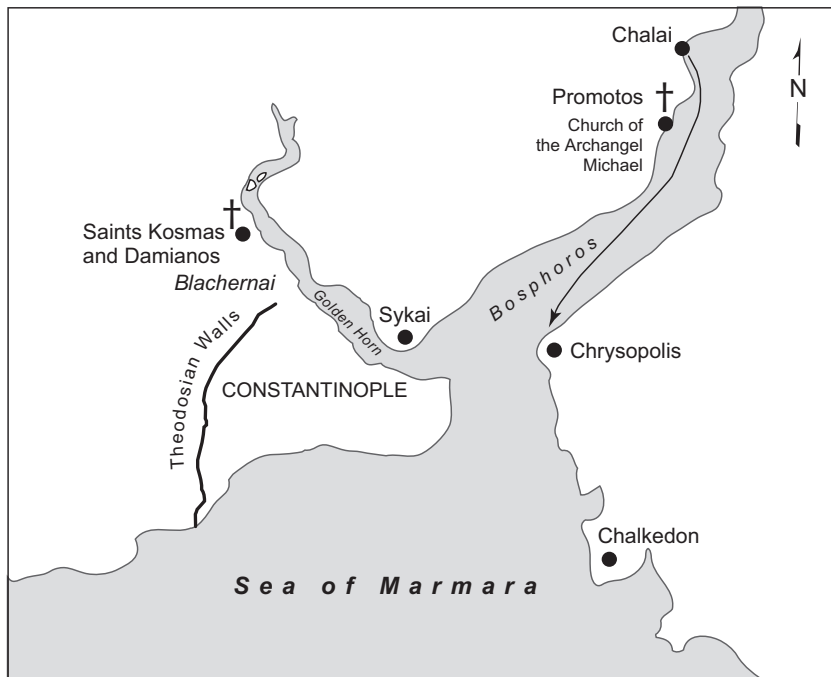


Fig. 9.1 An attempt to transport the Persian army across the Bosphorus; map by Ivan Varšo

The ships of the defenders undoubtedly destroyed and sank most of the Slavic monoxyles and the Persian allies. There is a mention of this encounter in a later Armenian chronicle attributed to Bishop Sebeos, which says that 4000 Persians perished in the water, while the Slavs were not even mentioned.²⁷ However, Ps.-Sebeos did not know the history of the Avar siege. He was convinced that the naval battle between the Persians and the defenders of Constantinople had taken place during the arrival of the Persian commander Shahan in Chalcedon. This is an inaccuracy that resulted from confusing two Persian forays to the Asian bank of the Bosphorus. We know for sure that Shahan had not attempted any military attack on Constantinople. This information therefore undoubtedly relates to the Avar siege in 626.²⁸ The khagan lost many canoes and could no longer hope for more Persian help. He had to try a massive attack on the city, because time was running out.

THE FINAL PLAN

After the failure in transporting his allies, the khagan had to rely on his own forces. Avar and Persian heavy cavalry could only demonstratively parade on both shores of the Bosphorus.²⁹ The previous evening the khagan had lost many Slavs and their canoes. Above all, he most likely regretted the loss of prestige after seeing the murdered Persian envoys. Over the next three days, he initiated minor attacks on the city in addition to the continuing barrage from catapults and other weapons.³⁰ The khagan prepared his own forces while planning a new large attack. What chance was there of success? Could the Avars count on breaking through the middle section of the Theodosian Walls? The subsequent course of events showed that the khagan was no longer considering an attack on this section. No source mentioned a concentration of forces in that area. At the final attack on the city, the khagan and his subordinates were not in the Lykos Valley but on one of the elevated hillocks near the Golden Horn instead.³¹ If he was planning an attack on the central sector of the Theodosian Walls, why was he not in that area where he had been up to that point?

Attacks in previous days had taken place all along the land walls. However, they were not that intensive, which was confirmed as much by Synkellos; this suggests that these attacks were ordered by the khagan as a diversion to shield his real intentions. On 6 August, the Avars attacked all along the walls day and night to exhaust the defenders and distract them. The Avar leader sought to apply pressure in the weakest area of the Constantinopolitan defences.

It was that of Blachernai, which descended from the slope of the sixth hillock to an adjoining plain stretching out by the Golden Horn. It was only guarded by a single wall with a citadel, the Brachialion, which stretched to the waters of the Golden Horn. As has been previously mentioned, at least a part of Blachernai remained open to the sea. The defenders were primarily relying on the strength of their heavy vessels: the *skaphokaraboi* guarding this part of the Golden Horn.

It was this weakness that the khagan was counting on in his calculations. He anticipated that he could attempt to break the fortifications of Blachernai with a combined attack from land and sea. Such an attack would force the defenders to split their forces, allowing the besiegers to take advantage of their numerical superiority. Which part of the Avar army was to take the prime role in the upcoming operation? Would it be the Slavs? Despite their significant number, they were only used as auxiliary

units for the Avars. In the preceding days, the khagan had used Slavic light infantry in forward positions, but it is unlikely that he would have given the Slavic dug-out boats the main role in the upcoming attack. A later source of the patriarch Nikephoros stated that the Slavs were supposed to cause confusion among the defenders, allowing the Avars to reach the Blachernai wall and get into the city. The khagan was surely aware of the military weakness of the monoxyles against the larger Roman vessels in the Golden Horn. In his planning, he had to take into consideration the risk of great losses. Should the Slavs therefore take the position of sacrificial lamb to draw the attention of the defenders away from the Blachernai wall? Most likely, this was the case. The truth is, however, that the khagan was not sending the Slavs into a lost fight. In his plan, the Slavic monoxyles could play the role of transporting forces for landing troops and attacking the city from the north. It is a fact that monoxyles also carried heavily armed forces.

In the early morning hours of 6 August, the khagan ordered a massive attack along the entire western part of the land walls.³² However, the official report preserved in the Paschal Chronicle has a large gap there, and Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia only give a few details.³³ The khagan evidently wanted to exhaust the defenders during the day as well as throughout the night. In the early hours of the morning, the main part of his plan was to be fulfilled. The beginning of the general attack is very unclear, with George of Pisidia being the only one to mention it. According to him the attackers initially took the places of the Judge and Strategos, the invincible Virgin—and they literally used them as a bulwark for their defence.³⁴ According to what is known, the attack took place on a plain before the Blachernai wall, where there was a partially built-up area along with the Church of Saint Nicholas and the Church of the Theotokos. However, it is unlikely that George had Blachernai in mind in a broader sense of meaning. This mention should probably be linked to the statement of the official report in the Paschal Chronicle, where it is stated that the enemies entered the Church of the Theotokos at Blachernai “but were completely unable to damage any of the things there, since God showed favour at the intercession of his undefiled Mother”.³⁵ It is very probably that such a foray occurred during the attack on the final day of the Avar siege. The Avars (or Slavs) apparently occupied the Church of the Theotokos, which was not protected by a wall and used it as a stronghold during their attack in the Blachernai sector. They could not damage the

interior of this sanctuary since all its precious decoration had already been removed during the previous Avar incursion in 623.³⁶

At around the same time, the monoxyles approached the Roman *skaphokaraboi*. The khagan planned to attack Blachernai simultaneously from sea and land. George of Pisidia poetically described the final stage of the whole operation: “The barbarian mind threw many Slavs into the boats and mixed them up with Bulgarians. He had the boats hollowed out in the shape of cups; he mingled the land battle with the naval one.”³⁷ The monoxyles evidently did not attack individually but rather in a closed formation. Even Theodore Synkellos emphasizes twice that the khagan had managed to turn the waters of the Golden Horn into “dry land” by using the monoxyles. Synkellos first mentions this at the beginning of the siege and then before the decisive attack on its final day.³⁸ George of Pisidia reports that the attackers “stretched their hollowed-out boats out like a fishing net”.³⁹ The Slavs tied their monoxyles to each other and interconnected them. They either bound several monoxyles together and created a kind of catamaran or raft or joined the monoxyles to each other to fill the entire area of the Golden Horn. Something similar had already been devised by the Slavs during their siege of Thessalonica in 586. They attempted to break into the unfortified port by using a wide wooden “platform”. It must have been an impromptu wooden structure similar to a pier, which the defenders of Thessalonica somehow managed to destroy and release into the open sea.⁴⁰ The joined monoxyles were used by the Slavs as early as in the second major attack on Thessalonica in 616, and they are also mentioned during the “long siege” of that city (676–678).⁴¹

The primary aim of the khagan was to break through the naval defences and then undertake a landing on the unprotected beach of the Golden Horn. The Slavic monoxyles were to serve as a means of transport to allow the elite heavy infantry to reach the shore. This was not the first time that this had been attempted. A similar attack had been tried in 559 by the Kutrigurs, who had used the harsh winter to cross the frozen Danube and unexpectedly attack the Roman territory. One of their groups got all the way south to Thrace and the Chersonesos Peninsula (now Gallipoli). Since ancient times, a 6-kilometre-long cross-wall stretching from the Aegean Sea to the Dardanelles had prevented access inland (Fig. 9.2).

The Kutrigurs, and most likely the Slavs, who probably also took part in this expedition, were unable to conquer this obstacle with ladders or any other equipment.⁴² Eventually they made around 150 reed rafts and

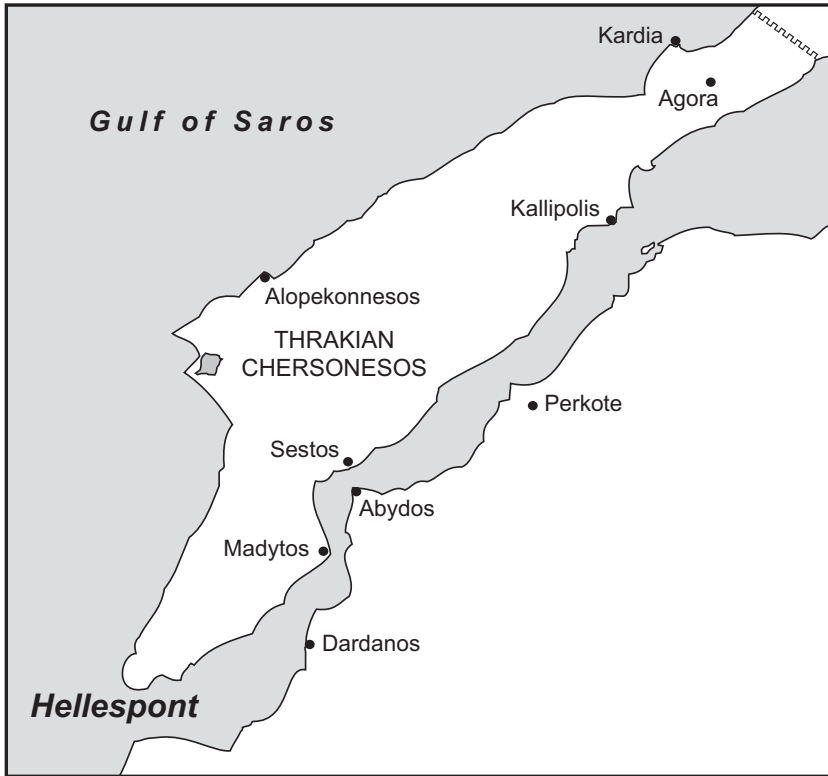


Fig. 9.2 The Long Wall of the Thracian Chersonesos; map by Ivan Varšo

put around 600 men onto the water.⁴³ They tried to go around the fortification wall, which stretched into the sea of the gulf hoping that this manoeuvre would see them safely disembark in the unprotected area.⁴⁴ The leader of the local Roman garrison, Germanos, had faced the same threat as Bonos did during the Avar siege. In 559, the enemy was at a considerable disadvantage due to the instability of these rafts and the threat of the open sea. Germanos immediately organized around twenty light ships which approached the enemy at speed through vigorous rowing. The Roman ships hit the rafts with great force, intensified by the breaking of waves. The Roman troops then jumped onto the rafts and finished off the enemy.⁴⁵

The reckless Kutrigurs and Slavs had not counted on such an attack by the Roman boats. This could not be said for the Avars, who must have reckoned with it from the beginning of the siege. The khagan most likely intended to do everything possible to break through, and so the Slavic monoxyles had to attack before sunrise. If the breakthrough and subsequent landing was to be successful, it had to happen quickly and unexpectedly.

The Slavic canoes quietly sailed over the shallow waters. However, the defenders were ready for them. The monoxyles initially approached the patrolling *skaphokaraboi*, and with war cries they attacked them. This initial attack was so swift that it caused some wavering among the defenders. The decisive phase of the battle came somewhere between the Brachialion of the Golden Horn and the unprotected shoreline at Blachernai. Unfortunately, the details of what occurred have been overshadowed by various elements of legend. The key source—the official report on the siege—has a gap in this part and only informs about its final stages.⁴⁶ However, an impressive picture of the battle and the separate fates of the attackers is given by George of Pisidia. The poet describes what happened to the attacks upon the basis of eyewitness accounts, turning them into a literary work where he allowed his own fantasies to take hold.⁴⁷

The defeat of the Slavs was significant despite the obvious exaggerations made by contemporary Greek authors. The waters of the Golden Horn did turn a fiery red, not caused by the rays of the sun but the blood of the fallen. Lifeless bodies and empty canoes were left floating aimlessly over the whole breadth of the harbour.⁴⁸ In the final stages of battle, the defenders grasped the initiative. Armenian forces, which had most likely been sent by Herakleios, attacked the Avars from the northern sector of the wall at Blachernai. Their attack was directed at the plain where the Church of Saint Nicholas and the adjoining colonnade were located.⁴⁹ It is possible that the Avars had reached this area at the time of the maritime attack by the Slavs. However, the Armenians came out onto the plain before the walls and deliberately set fire to the wooden dwellings there. The Armenians probably burned these down to make the approaching enemy forces halt their advance. The fires occurred only after the Slavic canoes had been defeated in battle. Most of the survivors were desperately swimming towards the shoreline in the hope of somehow saving themselves. At first sight, the fire on the plain appears to have been the work of the khagan's forces. And it was only when the Slavs approached the shore

that they realized they were sorely mistaken. Exhausted from battle and swimming, they were easy pickings for the waiting Armenians.⁵⁰

It has been said that some of them swam to the opposite shore and fled into the surrounding hills.⁵¹ Others did not have such luck, managing to swim to where the khagan himself was standing only to be killed without mercy.⁵² The rest of the Slavs simply retreated, and the khagan did not stop them from doing so.⁵³ Along with their leaders, some Slavs had presumably come to the walls of Constantinople voluntarily, having been promised a share of great plunder. The brutal attitude of the khagan may have shaken them so much that they decided to stop cooperating with him and withdraw.⁵⁴ In any case, the general confusion must have demoralized the internally unstable and ethnically diverse Avar army. The author of the *Strategikon* of Maurikios pointed out the instability of the nomadic horde, which was made up of many different elements, evaluating this as one of the greatest military weaknesses of the Avars.⁵⁵

THE STRATAGEM OF BONOS

A decisive part in the victory undoubtedly belonged to Bonos himself. While his military talents were praised by his contemporaries, the later patriarch Nikephoros would make him the definitive saviour of the city. His source for the Avar siege was written about fifteen or twenty years later, but it is an unofficial and probably orally transmitted report.⁵⁶ What it revealed on the attack itself is that siege engines (wooden towers and turtles) were prepared against the city but were destroyed by the power of God. It is only the decisive battle on the tenth day that is described in detail.⁵⁷

The Avars allegedly agreed on a common signal with the Slavs at the wall of Blachernai to coordinate their joint attack on the last day of the siege. However, Nikephoros literally says that the Avars gave the Slavs a sign or signal, which does not sound very logical. It seems the chronicler was either excerpting his source or had problems with its reading. In other words, the joint plan of the Slavs and the Avars first had to be discussed and only then followed by its form, that is, a signal fire.⁵⁸ Then it is stated that Bonos got wind on this plan and prepared his fleet of biremes and triremes (not *skapphokaraboi* as in the official version of the siege) where the “signal was given”.⁵⁹ From a formal point of view, this again poses a problem because the Avars had not given any battle signal to the Slavs yet. A logical explanation of this stratagem would be that the Slavs headed out

to battle earlier without the support of the Avars, which could have subsequently weakened the attack. But, Nikephoros does state that Bonos lit the false signal fires also on the opposite side of the Golden Horn—apparently to confuse the Slavs in their monoxyles. What could have been the aim of this manoeuvre? If the monoxyles crews agreed on a signal with the Avars at the wall of Blachernai, of what importance was the fire lit by the defenders on the opposite side? The purpose of such a “trick” in accordance with Nikephoros’s version of the events is that the false signal was meant to confuse the Slavs and make them launch the attack at the wrong time and place to eventually fall into the trap of the Roman ships.

The problem is that the Slavs did not sail out of the actual estuary of the Barbyzes, but, from a location much closer to the Blachernai. The Roman naval defence consisting of *skaphokaraboi* and the Slavic monoxyles could see each other. Moreover, as has been already stressed, on the decisive day of the attack in the Golden Horn, the ships of the Slavs did not attack separately but rather in a closed formation. Even in bad weather, it can hardly be assumed that the Slavic fleet of the joined monoxyles with limited manoeuvrability could cruise the waters of the Golden Horn back and forth and let itself be fooled by the fire burning on the opposite side. Nikephoros presented the naval attack of the Slavs as a surprising move by the khagan. However, Bonos must have expected it since the early days of the siege. The *skaphokaraboi* created a defensive line and assumed a permanent position right at the beginning of the siege and not on the decisive day of the attack. The position of these ships was not random, and it must have been linked to the already existing fortifications in Constantinople. The *skaphokaraboi* were prepared for the attack, and the only way the monoxyles could have succeeded was to penetrate their ranks.⁶⁰

The eyewitnesses of the siege knew nothing of the “intelligence” of Bonos. Such a silence is slightly surprising, although it could be explained by the genres used by authors such as Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia. The main problem in verifying Nikephoros’s story is that the official report on the siege preserved in the Paschal Chronicle has a gap in this very place. At the end of this section, it is said that the Slavs were confused by the fire lit by the Armenian defenders of Constantinople in front of the wall of Blachernai.⁶¹ However, that fire cannot in any way be linked with the signal mentioned by Nikephoros, which was agreed between the Slavs and the Avars since it is obvious that the Armenian units started their skirmish only after the destruction of the naval attack of the Slavic monoxyles. In other words, they attacked and burned the area only after the danger of

the flanking attack of the Slavs and their landing on the unprotected (or poorly defended) shore of the Golden Horn had passed away. This was perhaps not an intended move by the Armenians, but ultimately it spelt destruction for the remaining Slavs who managed to swim to the nearby shore. This action could have therefore become the original core of the report, which in the form of a legend was later preserved by the patriarch Nikephoros. The element of stratagem and the way the measures implemented by Bonos are highly questionable and probably belong to the category of the “garbled memory” of the Avar siege. What then decided the outcome of the battle?

THE HEAVENLY DESTRUCTION OF THE FLEET

Theodore Synkellos says that the crews of defending ships in the Golden Horn turned around at the first attack of the monoxyles. Furthermore, he adds that the enemy would have broken through the defences if they had not been sunk by Mary in front of her church in Blachernai.⁶² He stated that by her gesture and pure will, the Virgin alone threw the chariots of this new Pharaoh and all his forces into sea.⁶³

George of Pisidia says that at the time of the attack of the Slavic monoxyles, the visible (physical) battle became invisible. He too mentions that it was won by Mary herself and added that the carved boats (monoxyles) forcibly found their “harbour” in the rainstorm.⁶⁴ A little later, he meaningfully reiterates, “Nevertheless, the sea storm flooded all of them as one fleet.”⁶⁵ Despite this figurative expression, this could be a real image, which the author adorns by using poetic means. Even the official report on the siege indicates that the khagan suffered in one moment an instant blow inflicted by the sea.⁶⁶

Therefore, the storm could not only be of legend but a real natural phenomenon explaining the sudden destruction of the unstable Slavic monoxyles. When considering the stability of these canoes, it is enough to mention the naval attack of the Kutrigurs and probably also the Slavs on Chersonesos in Thrace. As stated by Agathias, their reed boats become unstable even under the faster rowing of the light Roman boats that went against them. During the siege of Thessalonica in 615 (or 616), the Slavs on the monoxyles tried to protect their oarsmen with protective planks, but their unstable boats soon fell into total disorder probably due to the sea waves.⁶⁷

One can surely imagine what a short storm could do to the Slav monoxyles on the final day of the Avar siege. On the other hand, the *skapphokaraboi* were in a better position. These were ships that were able to withstand a storm in the open sea and certainly the calmer waters of the Golden Horn. Moreover, they were likely to have been secured together by chains because they created a defensive barrier against the penetration of the monoxyles. According to the official report, the remaining defeated Slavs swam to the church of Saint Nicholas, which means that the *skapphokaraboi* did not abandon their former positions.

It is very interesting that none of the contemporary authors attribute any merit directly to the seamen in the sea battle. Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia highlight the role of Mary, but would a victory have been possible if there had not been this unexpected turn in battle? Synkellos admits there was a tenacious battle and even talks about their line of defence being broken through by the Slavs: "It is all too clear that the Virgin herself fought the battle and won a mighty victory because those who fought at sea on our ships had to flee due to a single attack of multitudes of enemies."⁶⁸

Synkellos says that the Roman naval defences wavered and that it would not have been long before they would have ceded easy access to the enemy. He even claims that in the opinion of some people, the city's sailors escaped not out of a fear of the enemy but rather because they had been ordered to do so by the Virgin Mary, who allegedly instructed them to pretend to escape so the Slavs would suffer defeat just before her church in Blachernai. History precedes myth here, but it must be noted that the author reaffirms the obvious wavering in the Roman ranks.⁶⁹

Therefore, it cannot be completely ruled out that the fate of the battle, but not the siege itself, was decided by a natural phenomenon. The contemporary authors immediately interpreted the victory as Mary's miracle, which was even more so because it took place in front of her church in Blachernai. Synkellos justifies the wavering of the Roman marine crews in the Golden Horn at the beginning of the naval battle and turns them into Mary's instruments. He had already used such a scheme before when describing the successful attack of the defenders against the Slavs gathered at the monastery in Pege.⁷⁰ However, there is a fundamental difference between these two examples. In the first one, Mary destroys the enemy using the hands of the soldiers.⁷¹ This means that the defeat of the Slavs at Pege was caused by the Roman soldiers, albeit led by the invisible instructions and guidance of Mary. Nothing like that appears in Synkellos's

description of the final naval battle. The victory was won solely by Mary, who “rose in her strength and power”.⁷² Synkellos probably delivered his sermon in front of the many participants of the siege, including the sailors and other defenders of the Golden Horn. The brave men would have hardly accepted his words if they had not been consistent with the fact that the battle could not have been won by them but only by the invisible power of God and his Mother.⁷³

NOTES

1. *Chronicon Paschale*, 721.6–10.
2. Theodore Synkellos, 306.27–32.
3. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1990–1992, 171–175.
4. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 329–330, 178.
5. *Chronicon Paschale*, 721.10–14.
6. *Chronicon Paschale*, 721.15 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 175); George of Pisidia (*Bellum Avaricum*, v. 342, 178) gives only 1000.
7. *Chronicon Paschale*, 721.15–21 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 175). Similar threats were used by the Khagan of the Western Turks against the fugitive Avars. Cf. Menander Protector, 4.2, 46.3–7.
8. *Chronicon Paschale*, 721.21–722.2.
9. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.1–4 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 175–176).
10. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.5–7.
11. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.6–8 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 176).
12. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.9–10.
13. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.11–14.
14. Theodore Synkellos, 307.1–4.
15. Theodore Synkellos, 307.4–7.
16. Theodore Synkellos, 307.8–11.
17. Howard-Johnston 1999, 31.
18. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.14–18.
19. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.18–723.3.
20. *Chronicon Paschale*, 723.3–5.
21. *Chronicon Paschale*, 723.5–8.
22. *Chronicon Paschale*, 723.12–15 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 177).
23. *Chronicon Paschale*, 723.19–21.

24. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.2–10.
25. Theodore Synkellos, 307.11–14.
26. Theodore Synkellos, 308.1–2.
27. Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 79; cf. Howard-Johnston 1999, 12; Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 211.
28. Howard-Johnston 1995, 140.
29. Theodore Synkellos, 308.15–21.
30. Theodore Synkellos, 308.2–4.
31. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.15–18.
32. Theodore Synkellos, 308.21–28.
33. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 417–435, 182, 184.
34. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 404–406, 182.
35. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.19–726.3 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 180).
36. Effenberger 2106, 323.
37. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 409–412, 182.
38. Theodore Synkellos, 301.5. and 308.8–9.
39. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 446–447, 184. Cf. also Pertusi 1959, 223–224; Hošek 1974, 101–103; Vryonis 2003, 74–75.
40. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.145, 151.26–27.
41. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.14.145, 151.26–27, and *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.4.243, 211.19.
42. Agathias, 5.21.1, 190.18–22.
43. Agathias, 5.21.6–5.22.2, 191.15–192.19.
44. Agathias, 5.22.2, 192.9–19. On this fortification, cf. Prokopios *De Aedificiis*, 4.10.15, 141.24–142.3; cf. Greatrex 1995, 125–127.
45. Agathias, 5.22.3–9, 192.19–193.27.
46. Theodore Synkellos, 308.8–9.
47. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 440–483, 184, 186.
48. Theodore Synkellos, 311.35–37.
49. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.11–12.
50. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.13–15.
51. Theodore Synkellos, 311.37–38.
52. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.15–18.
53. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.6–8.
54. Ivanov 1995, 82; Curta 2001, 109.
55. *Strategikon*, 11.2, 366.74–78.
56. Hurbanič 2017, 83.
57. Nikephoros, 13, 59.19–60.37. For a detailed analyse of this account, cf. Hurbanič 2017, 181–192.
58. Speck 1988, 300–301.

59. In this regard, cf. Speck 1980, 92 n. 106; 1988, 311. The criticism of Van Dieten (1985, 169) is not grounded in this case.
60. Hurbanič 2015, 212–213, n. 6.
61. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.11–15. A sceptical view of Nikephoros's report was also assumed by Pohl (1988, 253 and 428, n. 53). In his view, the Slavs would have been fooled twice in the exact same way.
62. Theodore Synkellos, 311.21–23.
63. Theodore Synkellos, 311.29–31.
64. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 462–463, 186.
65. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 473–474, 186.
66. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.18–19; Zuckerman, 2005, 113.
67. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.1.189, 178; cf. Vryonis 2003, 70–71.
68. Theodore Synkellos, 311.21–23.
69. Theodore Synkellos, 311.29–31.
70. Theodore Synkellos, 306.1–4.
71. Theodore Synkellos, 306.1–4.
72. Theodore Synkellos, 311.25–26.
73. Zuckerman 2005, 113.

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Winners and Losers

The Avar khagan was watching the terrifying destruction of his “fleet” from a raised hillock in the presence of his elite riders. His eyes were locked on the bay riddled with dead bodies and overturned dug-out canoes. “The wicked tyrant himself became an eyewitness of a disgrace that the Virgin filled him with, and a servant of his own doom” was how Theodore Synkellos triumphantly announced it.¹ In the meantime, the defenders of the city were cleaning up the Golden Horn, which was filled up with floating dead bodies. With the assistance of civilians, they carried all the monoxyles to land and began to collect them so that they could be set alight.² The infuriated khagan was allegedly striking himself on the chest and face when he saw such losses. He then ordered all the siege devices to be dragged away from the walls and left for the camp where he ordered them to be dismantled.³

The message of an unexpected victory in the Golden Horn was soon delivered by messengers to the troops on the Theodosian Walls. The triumph of the defenders was multiplied by many enemy heads on spears which were being carried to magister Bonos.⁴ The city gates were opened, and some military units rushed to the Avar camp with a war cry. Even women and children ran out of the city and found themselves behind enemy lines. The enemy army was defeated and probably scattered around in the nearby area, but it still posed a threat to defenders. Therefore, Bonos immediately ordered everyone to return back to the city.⁵

After sunset, the Avars removed the hides from the siege devices and then set them on fire.⁶ The fires along all the land walls merged into one big burning border. “The sky was glaring with fire the whole night, and the vast majority of the following day was full of smoke, so neither the city nor the sea were visible.”⁷ The most prominent dignitaries of the city were standing in front of the Golden Gate watching the fiery performance, raising their hands and shedding tears of thanks.⁸

WHY DID THE AVARS FAIL?

The defeat in the Golden Horn ruined all hope of the Avar khagan for success. For the defenders, it became the greatest miracle of the Virgin Mary—no one doubted that then. Even the godless khagan had allegedly caught a glimpse of “a woman in stately dress rushing about on the wall all alone”.⁹ From the military point of view, the failure of the whole siege was caused by various factors. However, only some of them can be classified as key ones. The khagan himself stated that his departure was caused by problems with supplies and by the bad timing of the whole attack.¹⁰ Was he telling the truth this time or was he only covering up the real state of affairs? According to some scholars, the first claim is correct; the Avars did in fact withdraw due to lack of food.¹¹ The emphasis on the Avars’ notorious problems with supplies is usually referred during the siege of Thessalonica in 586, where the attackers consumed all their food in a short time and finished their attempt in a week.¹² That siege was, however, the work of the Slavs, and the Avars were not directly involved.¹³ The khagan motivated the Slavs to attack with the promise of easy plunder, because the majority of the city had been battling the plague at that time.¹⁴

Already the three-year blockade of Sirmium indicated that Avars can, under certain circumstances, besiege a city over a longer period even without the necessary equipment. In the end, Sirmium capitulated in 582 because the attackers had blocked the river routes carrying reinforcements and supplies. It is, however, a fact that the khagan’s army did not recognize the key role of siege techniques and was mainly focused on lightning strikes against poorly defended targets. From the beginning of the seventh century, the Avars had to adapt to the changing conditions. In 618, they managed to besiege Thessalonica for thirty days. The khagan’s army and numerous Slavs who called him to help them had to have enough supplies to survive. The final failure was not caused by hunger but by the inability to get through Thessalonica’s city walls.

At the beginning of their invasions of the Balkans, the Avars had to reckon with the counterattack of the Eastern Roman field army, and this is why they could not lay siege to invaded areas for a long time. However, when Emperor Herakleios withdrew the majority of his troops from the Balkans, the Avars were not at such a risk anymore. On the other hand, the endangered cities probably fortified their walls and perhaps also strengthened themselves with some military deserters. They could not rely on the help of the emperor anymore but solely on their own forces and the spiritual support of the local patron saints.¹⁵

After the siege of Constantinople, the khagan did highlight the lack of food; but this was hardly the main reason for his departure. He had planned the whole siege for the summer months at a time when there was enough food in the fertile Thracian plains to satisfy the needs of the army and animals.¹⁶ His arguments, if they were indeed authentic, represented more of an excuse than reality. It is harder to explain his further statement that he did not attack the city at the right time. If he had planned to cooperate with the Persians and transport them over the Bosphorus, this step would have hardly been successful even with his earlier arrival. Even before the arrival of Shahrbaraz's army, the Constantinopolitan fleet was guarding the Bosphorus to prevent the Persians from getting to the other shore. Whether the Avars came earlier or not, a joint attack with the help of Shahrbaraz could have been realized only after the elimination of these naval defences.

For the success of the whole operation, the coordination of all the involved military forces was necessary. The problems arising from the ethnic diversity of the Avar army were fully manifested during the deciding onset on the tenth day of the siege. The massacre of defeated Slavs reveals the tough methods, but it is hardly possible to trust contemporary sources describing the khagan as an unreasonable animal blinded by his own power. Such a depiction is more propaganda than a real evaluation of his leadership. From the perspective of the whole operation, his organizational and logistics skills cannot be denied. Nobody before him had even undertaken such a complex attack on Constantinople. His concentration on the weakest part of the city, his attempt to involve the allied Persians in the whole operation, and the coordination efforts of land and naval forces indicate a certain amount of strategy and thought-out planning. The question is whether the Avars could manage such a complex operation with the means they had at their disposal.¹⁷ Traction catapults represented a new type of artillery, but they were not able to completely destroy the battlements and

eliminate the defences. A much greater threat for the city's defences could have resulted from the movable siege towers. The Avar *pyrgokastelloi* were high enough to threaten the outer Theodosian Walls, but technically they were no match for the sophisticated models from antiquity.¹⁸ An important factor was the large number of defenders who did not have to divide their strength over several sections of the extensive Constantinople fortifications as in case of the sieges in 1204 and 1453. On the other hand, the Persians could undoubtedly have helped the Avars with their perfect knowledge of laying sieges, but it is questionable whether they could have disrupted such a massive fortification as the Theodosian Walls.

During the attacks, none of the city walls was seriously damaged and the stability of the endangered sections of the fortification was not disrupted significantly.¹⁹ After failed attempts to break through the central part, the khagan aimed his attention at the weaker walls of Blachernai. Only there—of course, in cooperation with the massive attack of Slavic monoxyles—could he have had any hope of succeeding. On 6 August, the khagan was engaging the defenders all day along the whole length of the walls so that he could attack the weaker Blachernai fortification towards the end of the following day. However, the defenders of the city were expecting him. Firmer vessels than dug-out canoes were necessary for a successful Slavic attack and subsequent landing. Despite this, the interconnected Slavic canoes still endangered the positions of the Constantinopolitan defenders. During their massive attack, the khagan made a gamble because time was now his enemy. The inhabitants of the city knew about the arrival of reinforcements led by Theodore, the brother of Emperor Herakleios. Only this fact alone encouraged them to resist and gave them moral resilience, which increased every day of the siege. The Constantinopolitan envoys managed to report the arrival of these reinforcements to the khagan on 2 August. After the end of the siege, the khagan learned from an envoy that the Romans' relief army was going to cross the Bosphorus. The envoy was interpreting the words of Bonos which had been left for the khagan: "Until the present I had the power to talk and make terms with you. But now the brother of our most pious lord has arrived together with the God-protected army. And look! He is crossing over and pursuing you as far as your territory. And there you can talk with one another."²⁰

It is not at all certain if this was actually the truth. The threat to the khagan did not materialize; the imperial army did not pursue the Avars to their own territory. It is possible that when Theodore learned about the defeat and the departure of the Avars, he turned around halfway and again

joined the main forces which Herakleios was getting together for the next year's offensive against the Persians. The threat of the Roman army was undoubtedly one of the deciding moments of the siege and an effective tool of propaganda. The representatives of the city often camouflaged the real state of matters and were trying to confuse the khagan. A typical example of this attitude was an allegation made by envoys that Herakleios was devastating Persian territory at the time of the siege.

The khagan left the area of Constantinople during the night of 7–8 August. Only his rear-guard troops stayed behind. The following day, only a part of the Avar cavalry, which had been plundering the suburbs until one o'clock in the afternoon, stayed in the proximity of the walls. The Avars burnt down the Monastery of Saints Kosmas and Damianos near the shore at the far end of the Golden Horn. They also burnt down the Church of Saint Nicholas, where nearby fierce fighting had taken place on the final day of the siege.²¹ The khagan returned home with a decimated army. According to Avar deserters, many of his men did not survive the strenuous journey and died during the march. Theodore Synkellos states that the khagan was allegedly “angry with those who provoked him to such impudence”—that is, attacking the city.²² The Avar leader could have had the Persian envoys as well as hardliners in his own camp in mind.

After the departure of the Avars from the suburbs, the patriarch Sergios organized a celebratory church service in honour of the victory over the Avars. The regency council put together a report on the siege and the final triumph and sent it to Herakleios. We do not know when and where the emperor got familiarized with it. Theodore Synkellos announced rhetorically that before receiving the message, Herakleios had visited an unknown church of the Mother of God, where he prayed so that “those who were coming to him were messengers of good news. When he heard the news that matched his wish, he kneeled again in front of the eyes of the army and in tears bowed to God and the Virgin.”²³ Several months later on 11 May 627, magister Bonos, the commander of the defence and the hero of the Avar siege, died. He was buried with state honours in the Monastery of Stoudios.²⁴

Constantinople was saved, but not the rest of Balkans. The fight against the Persians remained a priority for Herakleios and that is why it is hard to imagine that he would engage himself with occupying an already considerably devastated part of the empire.²⁵ The only tangible precaution by the emperor was an order that the unprotected part of Blachernai with the Church of the Theotokos be enclosed by a wall to prevent any possible naval attack on it in the future.²⁶

THE AFTERMATH

The Persian soldiers were standing on the shore of the Bosphorus during the final act of the siege. There was nothing else for them to do than silently watch the rising flame and smoke, which was rushing from the other side of the strait. The fires probably persuaded Shahrbaraz for a certain time that the Avars had conquered the city. This image was, however, only an illusion. Theodore Synkellos states that Shahrbaraz stayed near Chalcedon for some time but finally withdrew after having his hopes dashed when it was obvious that the Avars had not conquered the city.²⁷ But a later chronicler, Theophanes, says that the Persians spent the winter near the Bosphorus and were plundering coastal regions and cities during that time.²⁸ Theophanes did not take this down at random. Later, when describing the final offensive of Herakleios, he came back to the story of Shahrbaraz's army. Shahrbaraz was allegedly vilified in the court by ill-wishers, and the Persian king Khusro decided to have him killed without any further discussion. He sent his envoy to Chalcedon with a letter for Kardarigas, who allegedly shared the commanding rank with Shahrbaraz. Khusro ordered him to eliminate the unwanted Shahrbaraz and bring the army back to Persia. Theophanes, however, states:

But the messenger who carried the letter was apprehended by the Romans in the area of Galatia. His captors, eluding the Persians, brought him to Byzantium and handed him over to the emperor's son. When the young emperor had ascertained the truth from the courier, he straight away sent for Sarbaros, who came into the emperor's presence. The emperor handed him the letter addressed to Kardarigas and showed him the messenger. Sarbaros read the letter and, being satisfied of its truth, immediately changed sides and made a covenant with the emperor's son and the patriarch. He falsified Chosroes's letter by inserting in it the instruction that, along with himself, another four hundred satraps, commanders, tribunes, and centurions should be killed, and he cunningly replaced the seal on it. He then convened his commanders and Kardarigas himself, and, after reading the letter, said to Kardarigas: 'Are you resolved to do this?' The commanders were filled with anger and renounced Chosroes, and they made a peaceful settlement with the emperor. After taking common counsel, they decided to depart from Chalcedon and return home without causing any damage.²⁹

THE ALLEGED TREASON OF SHAHRBARAZ

According to Theophanes, Shahrbaraz visited Constantinople, made an agreement there, and then left for Persia. Where did he get his information on the Avar attack from? Contrary to the majority of later Byzantine chroniclers, Theophanes drew from two independent sources. The first of them, which summarizes the siege briefly but relatively accurately, is undoubtedly of Constantinopolitan origin.³⁰ We do not have any direct Byzantine textual parallels to this report unless we count its literal copying by the eponymous later chronicler George Kedrenos.³¹ Theophanes could most likely have found the draft in a brief chronicle record or a Synaxarion, although this is just a hypothetical statement.

The second part of Theophanes's report, the so-called story of Shahrbaraz has well-known parallels with chronicles of Syriac and Syro-Arabic origin.³² These parallels are often explained by a common hypothetical archetype—the so-called Eastern source or common Syriac source commonly attributed to Theophilos of Edessa, an astrologist and a writer working towards the end of his life in the court of Abbasid Caliph al-Mahdi (775–785).³³ It was this lost work that is supposed to become, on the one hand, a basis and source for later Syriac chroniclers just like it was for Theophanes.³⁴ It is generally believed that these materials, either in a complete form or in the form of an unedited corpus, got to Theophanes in Greek translation from the Syriac original via his friend George Synkellos.³⁵ The postulated thesis on the common source will probably need certain corrections because its original language was Greek rather than Syriac.³⁶ Apart from that, it contains information which primarily relates to Eastern Roman matters recorded from a pro-Roman point of view. Its origin is Middle Eastern, and not from the central areas of the empire. The arrangement of this material in the common source was chronological but lacked the precise dating of events.³⁷ These preliminary conclusions must be especially kept in mind when judging the character of the information about Shahrbaraz's story as preserved by Theophanes.

The Syriac and Syro-Arabic chroniclers evidently drew from Theophilos's lost chronicle. Dionysios of Tel Mahre (d. 845) and the Arab Melkite Agapios/Mahbub from Manbij/Hierapolis (d. after 942) refer to this fact directly in their texts.³⁸ Theophilos, who knew Greek to a high level, therefore had also access to the original Greek material, which he subsequently translated into Syriac. The further stage of the spreading of the common source is subsequently documented by later Syriac chronicles

from the thirteenth century, such as the Chronicle of AD 1234 and the Jacobite patriarch Michael the Syrian, both of which drew from Dionysios of Tel Mahre.³⁹

In total, we can talk about two phases of transition of a common Eastern source—one by Theophanes and the other by authors of Syriac and Syro-Arabic origin. Shahrbaraz's story shows certain differences in all versions which follow from various stages of rewriting the common archetype. On the other hand, it must be taken into account that the postulated unpreserved Greek original, from which Theophilos and his epigones drew, was their only source of information about the siege from 626. As already mentioned, it was a local Eastern source which, except for Shahrbaraz's story, does not mention, unlike Theophanes, any further details about the Avar siege.

All the Syriac and Syro-Arabic reports on the siege of 626 show various inaccuracies at first sight. According to the Syriac accounts, it lasted nine months (Chronicle from AD 1234) or even a whole year (Michael the Syrian).⁴⁰ All of them mention only the Persians, who in fact did not participate in the siege directly and made only minor contribution to its military operations. The commander who appears as the executor of the orders of King Khusro under the name Kardigan/Kardarigan or Mardif (Agapios) is an unknown person, and it is not known whether he existed at all.⁴¹ Furthermore, Emperor Herakleios is incorrectly referred to as being present in Constantinople during the siege in all three versions of the story.⁴²

According to the Syriac chroniclers, the capture of the Persian envoys by the Romans occurred during the siege of Constantinople, but Agapios added that this could only have happened after the return of Herakleios from Persia.⁴³ Also, Agapios does not exactly specify the area where the Persian envoys were supposed to have been caught, whereas the Greek and Syriac versions mentioned Galatia in Asia Minor. Nor does Agapios refer to the number of the commanders who were to be executed together with Shahrbaraz (300 in the Syriac versions and 400 in Theophanes).⁴⁴

The anonymous author of the Nestorian Chronicle of Seert, compiled between 907 and 1020, probably did not draw on the common Syriac source. Instead, he presented his own version of Shahrbaraz's story resulting from the dispute between Khusro and Shahrbaraz, which had probably circulated among the Nestorian communities in Persia. Khusro was allegedly asked to punish Shamta, the son of the chief financial officer Yazdin, because he had insulted Shahrbaraz's daughter. Since the Persian king paid no attention to this incident, an enmity arose between him and

Shahrbaraz (Shahriyun).⁴⁵ The rest of the story shows considerable parallels with the Byzantine and Syriac traditions. Khusro wrote to the commander Fardengan to do away with Shahrbaraz, but the Persian messengers were caught by Herakleios's men in Galatia and were taken to the emperor. Herakleios then wrote to Shahrbaraz, and when the general learned about the death sentence, he declared disloyalty to Khusro. The anonymous Nestorian author does not mention that the events were taking place during the Constantinople siege, and there is a lack of a central motive behind the falsified letter.

The next stage of the transition of this story is represented by its Arabic and Persian adaptations. The origin of the versions preserved by Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 871) and al-Tabari (d. 923) dates back to the testimonies of traditionalists from the first half of the eighth century—al-Zuhri (d. ca. 742) and 'Ikrima (d. 724).⁴⁶ The connection with the attack on Constantinople has only been preserved in al-Zuhri, who states that it was Shahrbaraz's unwillingness to attack the city that caused the anger of the Persian king. Khusro subsequently ordered an unnamed commander to kill Shahrbaraz, but three times he refused to execute this order. The angry Khusro then ordered a change of roles and the commander was to become the victim. When both of them learned the contents of the letters, they decided to declare disloyalty to Khusro and call Herakleios to a joint meeting at which they would conclude an agreement on an alliance. Al-Tabari's interpretation, derived from 'Ikrima, is different from the previous version in several aspects. According to this version, Shahrbaraz was not supposed to become the main victim of Khusro's revenge, who would instead be his co-general and brother in one person. Al-Tabari knows him by the name "Farrukhan", which is actually the original name of Shahrbaraz himself. The chronicler created two siblings out of one person. According to him, Farrukhan allegedly had a dream in which he was sitting on the throne. The rumour of this vision soon got to Khusro, and he ordered he be done away with. Shahrbaraz twice refused to carry out the order; after that he himself was to become the victim of Khusro's anger. Shahrbaraz showed Farrukhan previous death sentences from the king which he had refused to carry out on his sibling. This way Farrukhan became convinced of Shahrbaraz's innocence and returned all the ranks to him. Then Shahrbaraz wrote to Herakleios and put forward a proposal for an alliance. The emperor accepted it and they arranged further details after their joint meeting. To keep the arrangement secret, they both killed the interpreter on command.⁴⁷

In the late Persian version found in *Shahnameh*, Shahrbaraz represents a victim as well as a traitor who challenged Herakleios in written form to conquer Iran. The angry Khusro reacted with a ruse and sent a letter to Shahrbaraz in which he praised his fidelity to the king. At the same time, Khusro's messenger was supposed to ensure that the letter would get to the hands of the Roman emperor. When Herakleios learned about the content of the letter, he accused Shahrbaraz of prepared intrigue. Thus, the Persian traitor fell into his own trap.⁴⁸

The story of Shahrbaraz's treason recorded by late Arabic and Persian authors represents a distant offshoot of one branched tradition. The Syriac chroniclers who more or less drew from Theophilos have no further information about the details of the attack on Constantinople. But Theophanes was another case. He was a Byzantine Greek from the central regions of the empire, and he knew, at least to a certain extent, the tradition of the Avar siege. In addition to that, he had information from the Eastern source together with the story of Shahrbaraz at his disposal. As is obvious from later Syro-Arabic versions, the report on the siege of Constantinople, the story of the falsified letter, and the subsequent rebellion by Shahrbaraz were chronologically arranged into the final offensive of Emperor Herakleios towards the end of 627.

Theophanes therefore tried to logically connect the Eastern source with his Byzantine version of the Avar siege. He did it in a way which corresponded to the level of his knowledge and the possibilities offered by his limited sources of information. In compliance with his Eastern source, he also placed the story of the falsified letter in the final offensive by Herakleios in Persia, having also an official dispatch from the emperor to his subjects in Constantinople at hand. To eliminate the contradictions of both sources, Theophanes slightly adjusted the story of the falsified letter to get it in accordance with credible facts regarding the Avar attack. He undoubtedly knew that Emperor Herakleios was not in Constantinople at that time, and that is why he had to be substituted by his son Herakleios-Constantine, who was a formal member of the regency council. Theophanes also knew that Shahrbaraz did not besiege Constantinople directly and that he was definitely not in Thrace, as is claimed by the Syriac version of the story preserved by the Chronicle of Jacobite Patriarch Michael.⁴⁹ Theophanes thus logically located the Persian army in Asia Minor close to Chalcedon. He then mechanically copied the rest of Shahrbaraz's story taken from his Eastern source and put it, like the Syriac chroniclers, one year later in the context of Herakleios's final campaign in Persia. Contrary

to fact, Shahrbaraz appeared at one moment in Constantinople, where he was shown the letter with the death sentence. However, according to the Eastern source, this meeting took place sometime during the last phase of the Roman–Persian War. Theophanes therefore tried to align this information with his Byzantine source on the Avar siege again. He knew that Shahrbaraz indirectly took part in the siege of Constantinople but also that Herakleios’s offensive in Persia took place one year later. The logical conclusion was that Shahrbaraz must have stayed near Chalcedon the whole year and plundered the coastal areas of Asia Minor. Even after the Battle of Nineveh (12 December 627), Theophanes mentions that Herakleios decided to continue in the fight against Khusro with the intention of scaring him and forcing him to withdraw Shahrbaraz’s army from Constantinople. It is, however, very questionable whether this notice was an original part of Theophanes’s text, because it is absent in the Latin translation of Anastasius Bibliothecarius, who had a considerably better manuscript of his *Chronographia* at hand than the rest of the currently preserved ones.

The patriarch Nikephoros, a contemporary of Theophanes, also placed Shahrbaraz’s story with the falsified letter in the final act of the last war of antiquity. His version is, however, very different from the common archetype which the Syriac authors and Theophanes drew from:

Now Chosroes, when he had heard all these things and the fact that the Turks were fighting on the side of Herakleios, made everything known to Sarbaros in writing and (directed him) to return from the Roman country with all speed so as to ward off Herakleios, since he himself was unable to oppose the latter’s numerous host. This letter was intercepted and delivered to Herakleios who, after reading it, erased the contents and forged a different message to Sarbaros as if it were from Chosroes, whose seal he affixed to it. It ran as follows: ‘The Roman Kaiser had concluded an alliance with the Turks and has marched in as far as the country called Adorbadigan. I have sent an army against him and have destroyed him along with the Turks, and the remainder have fled. Do not, therefore, depart from the Roman country, but go on investing Chalcedon, taking Roman captives and devastating (their land).’ On receipt of this letter Sarbaros continued the siege.⁵⁰

It is hypothetically assumed that for the years 602–641, Nikephoros used only one source of Constantinopolitan origin which was written, based on the character of the content, by a Monothelete sympathizer, perhaps by a supporter of the patriarch Pyrrhos.⁵¹ Nikephoros’s *Historia*

Syntomos represents, from the view of the used source (the mid-seventh century) and the time of its composition, the closest preserved testimony of Shahrbaraz's story in terms of time.⁵² The connection between this story and the Avar siege is expressed very ambiguously by Nikephoros, because we only learn about the fact that Shahrbaraz was besieging Chalcedon from the falsified letter which Herakleios had himself created.⁵³ In the report on the siege itself which follows, Nikephoros, or rather his source, does not mention the further destiny of Shahrbaraz or even the participation of the Persians in the siege of Constantinople. The addressing of Herakleios as "*kaisar*" by the source of Nikephoros is also interesting.⁵⁴ Nikephoros calls the holders of a court title in this way but not the Roman emperors themselves.⁵⁵ Such a title was, however, officially given to them by the Persian kings, as is aptly documented in a Roman–Persian treaty of 562 preserved in Menander's Fragments.⁵⁶ Therefore, it cannot be excluded that the version of Shahrbaraz's story preserved by Nikephoros is also based on the Eastern or perhaps Persian source.

In all of the versions which connect the Avar siege with Shahrbaraz's story, the latter represents only the historical background, a sort of a distant echo of the past. Neither the alleged passivity of Shahrbaraz during the Avar siege of Constantinople nor the textual accordance of what at first sight appear to be independent sources can be proof of the truthfulness of this story.⁵⁷ The postulated passivity of the Persian army is disproved by contemporary sources which inform of the agreements of the Persians with the Avars and of their mutual coordination.⁵⁸ The attitude of the defenders of Constantinople towards Shahrbaraz is best proved by the massacre of the Persian envoys, which was in stark contrast with all the diplomatic rules.⁵⁹

It is not clear how the relationship between Shahrbaraz and his sovereign evolved after the failure of the siege of Constantinople in 626. The Persian commander then probably withdrew to occupied Roman territory, where he was expecting a further development in the situation. Had he already decided not to obey the Persian king anymore?⁶⁰ This is hardly probable. According to one credible report, in September 627 an unnamed Persian marzban in Syria and Palestine was still following Khusro's orders when he was deciding about the fate of the future Christian martyr Anastasios the Persian.⁶¹ This was already at the time of the beginning of the Romans' final attack in Persia, which means that Shahrbaraz was not yet a rival of the Persian king at that time.⁶² The unexpected autumn offensive of Herakleios supported by a great attack by the Turks in Albania

fully uncovered the weak spots of the Persians' defence. Khusro did not have adequate forces, and his only hope, just like after the Roman offensive from 624, remained Shahrbaraz's expeditionary force. If Khusro did turn to the still loyal commander, then he must have counted with the fact, just like in 624, that Shahrbaraz would need some time to mobilize his soldiers and get them to the base in Nisibis and from there to Persian heartlands.⁶³ In addition to that, there were still two sons of Shahrbaraz's at the Persian court who Khusro had apparently held hostage.⁶⁴ The question is whether Shahrbaraz would have risked their death with an open revolt. Even more important is that they both stayed alive even at the time to which Shahrbaraz's treason is dated. What price could they have had for Khusro if he had had information about the absolute loss of loyalty of his servant at that time?

The whole story of Shahrbaraz's defection from Khusro is nothing more than a back projection, typical for the genre of legends, the aim of which was to clarify and give reasons for the later agreement between Herakleios and Shahrbaraz sealed in July 629.⁶⁵ This story probably had its origins in Herakleios's propaganda, which later spread to the Melkite Greek communities of Syria and Palestine before finally indirectly becoming—thanks to George Synkellos—a part of Byzantine chronography. After all, disinformation and falsified letters are also proved by the official report on the Avar siege.⁶⁶ At the same time, the Persian origin of this story, which could have also spread through Eastern/Greek and Syrian intermediaries, cannot be excluded with certainty. One thing is certain, though. It had hardly anything in common with the aftermath of the Avar attack on Constantinople in 626.

EPILOGUE

The neutralization of Shahrbaraz's army was very likely a turning point in the last war of antiquity. It was not, however, a consequence of a deliberately stratagem, espionage, or treason but rather a prosaic outcome of a catastrophic military operation planned by Khusro in the spring months of 626. From this point of view the most important factor was probably a total destruction of Shahan's army, but above all its elite part, which had originally formed nucleus of Shahrbaraz's forces.⁶⁷ From that point on, Shahan, and more importantly his forces, ceased to play any role in the following military operations, which indirectly points out the extent and the size of this defeat. Without the possibility of intervening directly in the

siege of Constantinople, Shahrbaraz's role during the Avar siege was in fact predetermined. The failure of the Avars and their allies below the Constantinopolitan walls then lead to the withdrawal of Shahrbaraz from the western part of Asia Minor. On top of that, his expeditionary force weakened because some of the soldiers, probably 4000 men, died during a failed attempt at getting to the other side of the Bosphorus.⁶⁸

The total mobilization of the Persian forces in 626 made a plundering breakthrough by small detachment of Turks through the Derbent Pass in today's Dagestan easier. The Turkic embassy, allegedly about 1000 men strong, went to the Black Sea coast, where it established contact with the Emperor Herakleios.⁶⁹ Khusro, apparently, did not have soldiers so he limited himself to the threat of the return of his armies to Asia Minor.⁷⁰ After the destruction of Shahan's army, Shahrbaraz's expeditionary force represented the only solid counterweight, which could have jeopardized Herakleios' upcoming offensive in 627/628. The emperor probably counted on the fact that Shahrbaraz would—just like at the turn of 624/625—need certain time to mobilize his forces stationed in occupied areas. On the other hand, Khusro did not have adequate military forces at his disposal which could face the parallel attacks of Herakleios in Armenia and the Turks in the area of Caucasian Albania despite the considerable mobilization of available forces.⁷¹ The only possibility that could have averted the devastation of central Mesopotamia by the imperial army was grounded in a diversionary attack under Shahrbaraz's command, while it remains probable that Khusro did count with this possibility.⁷² Furthermore, the Turks did not take part in Herakleios's winter offensive anymore, and the numerical superiority of the Roman forces over their enemies was probably not very high, as is proven by Herakleios' concerns about the arrival of Persian reinforcements before the deciding battle with Roch Vehan near Nineveh in December 627.⁷³ In this situation, Herakleios opted for a combination of diplomacy with a repeated offer for peace and pressure operations accompanied by a systematic destruction of central areas of Persia.⁷⁴ The intransigence of the Persian king and his intended successor policy logically provoked the opposition, which enthroned a new king, Kavad Shiroe, in a military coup.⁷⁵ On the other hand, Herakleios' unexpected crossing of the Zagros Mountains in the winter months of 628 was undoubtedly connected with the worries of the possible arrival of Shahrbaraz's forces.⁷⁶ That Persian commander did not intervene in the war anymore, and he equally refused the written appeal of the new king Kavad Shiroe to leave the occupied territory. There was no

clear winner in the last war of antiquity, as is evidenced by the further development of the Roman–Persian relations. In 615, the traditional bipolar world of late antiquity was in ruins.⁷⁷ Fourteen years later, Herakleios and Shahrbaraz attempted to revitalize it at Arabissos, in the Anti-Taurus, the result of which meant the final voluntary withdrawal of Persians from the occupied Roman territories.⁷⁸ Such symbolical bringing back the Persians to the negotiating table would have been barely possible without the successful aversion of the concentrated Persian–Avar pressure and the holding on to Constantinople in the summer of 626.⁷⁹

NOTES

1. Theodore Synkellos 312.1–2.
2. Theodore Synkellos, 312.5–7; *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.20.
3. Theodore Synkellos, 312.31–39; *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.20–725.3.
4. Theodore Synkellos, 312.5–11.
5. Theodore Synkellos, 312.23–27.
6. Theodore Synkellos, 312.31–39; *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.3–5.
7. Theodore Synkellos, 312.36–40.
8. Theodore Synkellos, 312.39–313.4.
9. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.9–11 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 180).
10. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.11–15.
11. Barišić 1954, 392; Kaegi 2003, 140.
12. Pohl 1988, 256; cf. also Bóna 2000, 169.
13. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.13.117, 134; cf. Petersen 2013, 375–376.
14. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 1.13.117, 134.
15. Mich. Whitby 1998, 191–208.
16. Tsangadas 1980, 102–103.
17. Kaegi 2003, 140.
18. For these, cf. Lendle, 1983, 36–106.
19. Tsangadas 1980, 104.
20. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.6–10 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 181).
21. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.18–20.
22. Theodore Synkellos, 313.10–12.
23. Theodore Synkellos, 319.35–39.
24. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 726.16–727.2.
25. Lilie 1985, 17–43; Pohl 1988, 255.
26. *Chronicon Paschale*, 726.14–15 and apparatus criticus; Nikephoros, 13, 60.40–41; *Patria*, 3.75, 176.

27. Theodore Synkellos, 313.14–27, in this connection also 314.5–11. Cf. Howard-Johnston 1999, 21.
28. Theophanes, 316.25–27.
29. Theophanes, 323.22–324.16 (the English translation by Mango and Scott 1997, 452–453).
30. Howard-Johnston (1994, 68, n. 27) supposed that Theophanes used an anonymous Constantinopolitan chronicle for his short account of the Avar siege, hence the same source as that by the patriarch Nikephoros.
31. George Kedrenos, 721.18–20 and 733.3–19. The abridged version of this story is preserved by John Zonaras (210.9–16).
32. Speck 1988, 144–152.
33. Brooks 1906, 587; Proudfoot 1974, 367–439; Speck 1988, 516–519; Mango and Scott 1997, lxxxii–lxxxiii; Hoyland 1997, 400–409 and 631–671 and 2011, 1–35. Palmer 1993, 95–104 and Brandes 2009, 321–322, 326–329. For the most recent discussion: Jankowiak 2013, 247–249 and 260; Debić 2015, 365–382; Conterno 2014, 4–20 and 2015, 383–400.
34. Cf. most recent: Debić 2015, 365–382.
35. Mango 1978, 9–17; Mango and Scott 1997, LXXXII. For a criticism of this view: Speck 1988, 499–501.
36. Conterno 2015, 393.
37. Hoyland 2011, 25, and 2015, 19; Conterno 2015, 386. Speck (1988, 516–519) concluded that the source of Theophanes was actually a Greek dossier by George Synkellos.
38. Hoyland 2015, 355.
39. Palmer 1993, 95–97.
40. Michael the Syrian, 11.3, 408.
41. Cf. Schreiner 1985, 251, n. 128. A certain indication of the existence of this person is given by Movses Dasxuranc'i. In the second book of his chronicle, he states that after Turkic invasion of Caucasian Albania in the summer months of 626, Khusro threatened to call his victorious armies from the West—besides Shahrbaraz and Shahen, a certain K'rtakarēn is mentioned. According to Dowsett (1961, 82, n. 2), this could have been a mangled form of the Armenian name Kartarihan (Kardarigas with Theophanes). Pourshariati is the only one who considers him to be the true Persian commander.
42. Agapios, 462; Michael the Syrian, 11.3, 409; *Chronicon AD 1234*, 98, 182.
43. Agapios, 462.
44. Theophanes, 324.9.
45. *Chronicon Seert* 2.2.87, 540–541; cf. Frendo 2000, 34–35.
46. Al-Tabari, 319; Al Zuhri, 108–110.

47. It is possible that these versions reflect the meeting of Shahrbaraz and Khusro in the Arabissos Pass in 629 in a mangled form. Cf. Howard-Johnston 2006, 12–14 and 2010a, 368–369.
48. Ferdowsi, 8, 63–64, 407–411.
49. Michael the Syrian, 11.3, 408.
50. Nikephoros, 12, 56.49–57.1–2 (the English translation on 57, 59). Cf. Speck 1988, 292–297.
51. Cf. Mango 1986, 543 and 1990, 14; Zuckerman 2013, 206–207; Howard-Johnston 2010a, 248.
52. Cf. Conterno 2014, 7.
53. Nikephoros, 12, 56.61–58.1–2.
54. Nikephoros, 12, 56.57; cf. Frendo 2000, 35.
55. Frendo 2000, 35.
56. Menander Protector, 6.1, 62.182–183.
57. Cf. Mango 1985, 107–109. Van Dieten (1972, 21), Kaegi (2003, 149–153), and Pourshariati (2008, 141–149) also thought this story was authentic.
58. *Chronicon Paschale*, 717.22–718.1–4; 721.4–21–722.1–14.
59. *Chronicon Paschale*, 722.15–21–723.1–15.
60. Shahrbaraz's treason is dated by various authors from the second half of 626 to the beginning of 627 at the latest. Cf. Pourshariati 2008, 142; Stratos 1968, 231–234 and Kaegi 2003, 150–151, 180–181.
61. *Acta Martyris Anastasii Persae*, 27–29, 71–73.
62. Frendo 2000, 36.
63. According to D. Frendo (2000, 37), this appeal should be dated after the Battle of Nineveh (12 December 627).
64. Theophanes, 326.12–13. Cf. Howard-Johnston 2006, 12.
65. *Chronicon AD 724*, 114.
66. *Chronicon Paschale*, 723.11–15.
67. Theophanes, 315.1–5.
68. Ps.-Sebeos, 38, 79.
69. In the eleventh chapter of his History of Albania (2.11, 81–83), Movses Dasxuranci gives an undated account on the penetration of the Khazars (Turks) into Albania. Then he mentions the general offensive of the Turks and Emperor Herakleios, which he correctly dated to the thirty-eighth year of Khusro's reign (June 627–June 628). In the following chapter (2.12, 87) Dasxuranci mentioned the embassy of Herakleios to the Turks (the thirty-sixth year of Khusro's reign, June 625–June 626). This is followed by information about the arrival of the Turkic envoys (1000 men) to the emperor. Subsequently, Dasxuranci referred to the Turkic invasion dated to the early thirty-seventh year of Khusro's reign (June 626). Cf. also Baynes 1912, 120–122 and Dowsett 1961, 87, n. 4. However, Dasxuranci

only gives vague information on this attack, limiting it only to the exchange of letters between a nephew (shad) of the king of the north and Khusro; then he abruptly goes over to the well-known Roman invasion to the heartlands of Persia dated to 627/628. Zuckerman (2007, 405) has pointed out that Dasxuranc'i drew information on these events from two independent sources which he simply pasted together. It is thus very likely that the accounts of the penetration of the Khazars into Albania (11) and that of the embassy of the Turks to Herakleios (12) in fact represent two different versions of the same story. The Turkic envoys were strong enough to pass through the heavily fortified Derbent Pass and proceed to the area of Pontos, where the concentration of the Roman troops under Herakleios was taking place. This breakthrough might evoke a kind of raid through the regions of Albania, as Movses Dasxuranci (12, 87) aptly noted in the context of "sparing none who came to meet them". As Baynes (1912) has already observed, the mention of the returning of the Khazars "through the same pass" and Khusro's threats to call back his victorious commanders from the west should only relate to the beginning of the summer of 626. The finalization of the treaty with the Turks in the summer of 626 was therefore the main reason why Herakleios preferred to remain in Pontos instead of coming to help endangered Constantinople.

70. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.11, 82.
71. For the siege of Tiflis: Shapira 2015, 45–62; Howard-Johnston 1999, 22–26. Khusro was only able to send a corps of 1000 men from Ktesiphon. Movses Dasxuranci, 2.11, 85. Cf. Howard-Johnston 2006, 14–16. On the possible routes used in this campaign, cf. Gerland 1894, 362–373; Manandyan 1950, 146–151.
72. Cf. Nikephoros, 12, 56.49–51.
73. For the departure of Turks (Theophanes, 317.11–16). Cf. Stratos 1968, 207–208; Howard-Johnston 1999, 25. For a contrasting point of view, cf. Zuckerman 2007, 414–415. For the Persian reinforcements: Theophanes, 318.8–11. The best reconstruction of the Battle of Nineveh is given by Kaegi 2003, 160–169.
74. Theophanes, 320–323.
75. Howard-Johnston 1999, 5–7; 2004 96–99 and 2006, 16–19, Kaegi 2003, 170–180.
76. *Chronicon Paschale*, 731.21–732.6; Ps.-Sebeos, 39, 84.
77. Howard-Johnston 2008, 83; Payne 2013, 30–32.
78. Cf. the subsequent discussion concerning the new Roman–Persian frontier at Euphrates. This information was accepted by J. Howard-Johnston (1999, 27–29; 2004, 28). For a contrasting point of view, cf. Stratos 1968, 247; cf. also Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 227 and 314, n. 148,
79. Howard-Johnston 2010b, 65.

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From History to Legend

Constantinople experienced many great sieges in its long history. The unsuccessful attempt of the Avars and their allies is one of the most well-known, mainly thanks to the considerable number of preserved reports. The detailed course of the siege is described by three contemporary testimonies and a whole series of later records. Ordinary people must have considered the victory as a miracle as it was achieved without the help of the emperor or the core of the Roman field army. They did not doubt that the divine power stood behind the unexpected defeat of the “barbarians”. They ascribed the central role to Mary the Intercessor, who first interceded with Christ for the inhabitants of Constantinople and later intervened in the middle of the siege. This image is vividly expressed in the prologue to the Avar siege which has been preserved in the Paschal Chronicle:

It is good to describe how now too the sole most merciful and compassionate God, by the welcome intercession of his undefiled Mother, who is in truth our Lady Mother of God and ever-Virgin Mary, with his mighty hand saved this humble city of his from the utterly godless enemies who encircled it in concert, and redeemed the people who were present within it from the imminent sword, captivity, and most bitter servitude; no-one will find a means to describe this in its entirety.¹

These lines clearly differ from the rest of the report in their pomposity and adornment. They probably come from the very author of the chronicle, who compiled the work ten years after the siege. In the introduction,

he stated that this was not the first time Mary had intervened for the benefit of Constantinople. The previous Avar incursion in 623, which the inhabitants commemorated with a liturgical procession every year, was probably still vivid in their minds.

The Marian interpretation of the siege is certainly not the product of a later tradition as one might think. For both eyewitnesses, Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia, the miracle of the Holy Mother in the Golden Horn was the central theme of their works. The first one perceived the Avar siege as proof of the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. That concept was, however, unimaginable without the Virgin Mary who had participated in this mystical act. It is no coincidence that Synkellos refers to the seventh Book of Isaiah, particularly to the passage where the birth of the Messiah from the Virgin is predicted: “The sign was given to the House of David, and it became reality. The Virgin gave birth to God, and the virginity remained intact.”² Synkellos used this prophecy as the proof of the truthfulness of the Christian message. The second Isaiah—Constantinopolitan Patriarch Sergios—becomes its devout preacher.³

The history of the Avar siege was according to Synkellos a story of the “miracles and apparitions of the Holy Mother” which were demonstrated to the inhabitants of Constantinople.⁴ Mary symbolizes the instrument of God, who performed a miracle. Constantinople was a God-protected city, but Mary was its protector and “the leading warrior”.⁵ It was to her that Herakleios had symbolically entrusted Constantinople before his departure. The emperor’s children and the patriarch Sergios, who ordered the general worship of Mary’s name, prayed to her.⁶ The portraits of the Virgin were supposed to scare off the attackers who had set up camp in front of the city. Upon the arrival of the Avars, the patriarch turned to them and said: “It is against them, (images)—o, foreign nations and demonic tribes—that you wage war, yet all your boldness and pride will be destroyed by the Holy Mother with one command because she really is the Mother of the one who drowned the Pharaoh and all of his troops in the Red Sea and intimidated and weakened the whole devilish tribe.”⁷

It was on the third day of the attack that Mary carried out her first miracle—this time still with the help of the Roman soldiers who killed the enemies in front of the monastery in Pege.⁸ The crucial moments of the siege were again interpreted as the work of the Virgin and God. Mary acts as the only participant in the decisive sea battle in the Golden Horn. Even the Avar khagan witnessed the shame she inflicted on him. He learned the lesson “that no God is as great as ours, and there is no power that could

oppose the Virgin".⁹ Mary also delivered her last miracle indirectly, through the enemies who themselves destroyed their own siege machines.¹⁰

For Theodore Synkellos, both Christ and Mary contributed equally to the victory. The true Israel—the inhabitants of Constantinople—took refuge in them. Herakleios prayed to both heavenly patrons after the end of the attack at an unnamed place but, characteristically, in the church of the Holy Mother.¹¹ This was before he learned the news of the final victory. Theodore Synkellos turned one more time to the prophet Isaiah at the end of his homily. He praises him for being the first who predicted the existence of the Virgin Mary and calls upon him to ask her to protect Constantinople in the future.¹²

The second eyewitness of the siege, George of Pisidia, also emphasizes the connection between Christ and Mary as the real saviours of Constantinople. The ones to whom George of Pisidia's poem *Avar war* is dedicated, the patriarch Sergios and Emperor Herakleios, are not at the forefront. Rather, it is the Virgin Mary.¹³ While George of Pisidia denotes Sergios as the main protagonist of the siege, this is mainly for his ability to recognize the real Holy Mother and the role she played in the defence of the city. Mary is the only one to whom George attributes the victory over the Avars. According to him, one only has to look at a painting of her which without any words symbolizes her triumph. In the beginning of the poem, the author notes:

If any of the painters want to show victorious battle trophies, they will put the one who gave life without conceiving at the forefront and paint her. Because they know she always wins in both giving birth and fighting. As once without conceiving, now without a weapon she gave life to salvation. Through both fighting and giving birth, she proved herself to be the invincible Virgin.¹⁴

This is where George of Pisidia compares the Holy Mother to the victorious trophies which were used in the Roman army. On a mystical and real level, this image will be later connected with icons which the enemies saw during liturgical processions.¹⁵ In comparison to Theodore Synkellos, the active role of the Mother of Christ strengthens even more. In the poem, she became the most important element in the scheme of a new spiritual victory, this time over the Avars as terrestrial enemies. George of Pisidia later returns to the motif of Virgin's double victory over the forces of darkness. Her mercy and compassion managed to save the sinners, whose souls were encumbered "with the barren wickedness of our despicable deeds which drove us into the flames and doom".¹⁶ Her tears were water that destroyed but also purified the wicked actions of the enemies on

the boats who armed themselves against the city. In this way, George of Pisidia and Theodore Synkellos clearly lay down the idea which was being crystallized after the thwarting of the Avar attack. Mary became the real patron of Constantinople and its saviour—both the mediator and the real actor of the victory—as a weak compassionate person and at the same time as an active protector and leading warrior who personally intervened in the battle in a mystical way.¹⁷

CONSTANTINOPLE AND THE CULT OF THE HOLY MOTHER

Above the imperial entrance of the Church of the Hagia Sophia, there is an impressive mosaic presented to visitors. Two of the most important Christian emperors—Constantine the Great and Justinian I—bow their heads before the Holy Mother, who is holding the Infant Jesus in her arms. The first emperor consecrates the city to her and the second emperor does so with its spiritual symbol—the cathedral church of Hagia Sophia (Fig. 11.1).

This magnificent mosaic comes from the era after the end of iconoclasm and carries a vivid legacy. Constantinople is Theotokoupolis: the city of the Holy Mother, the real harbour of the Virgin, and the place of her



Fig. 11.1 The narthex of Hagia Sophia; photograph by Martin Hurbanič

eternal dwelling. The picture continues to be the Byzantine Marian legacy which was formed over centuries. But above all it is a testimony of the era in which it was created, an era following the end of iconoclastic storms and the restoration of the cult of holy images. Such a reflection is found in later Byzantine accounts, which also claim that Constantine the Great consecrated Constantinople to the Holy Mother. Probably for the first time, this theme is developed in the anonymous *Life of the Constantine the Great* (the *Legend of Patmos*) dated to the ninth/tenth century.¹⁸ It appeared in the form of the miraculous appearance of Christ on the eve of the battle at the Milvian Bridge when Constantine was allegedly foretold that he would build a city dedicated to the Mother of God.¹⁹ Later, the emperor fulfilled this prophecy in Byzantium according to the advice of Euphratas, one of his closest servants.²⁰ Similar stories also occurred in some late Byzantine chronicles.²¹ For the anonymous author who praised the miraculous rescue of Constantinople in 1402 against the Ottomans, the Mother of God was the one “to whom the great Emperor Constantine consecrated Constantinople and the one we call its patroness”.²²

The shaping of such ideas goes back a very long way in the Byzantine Empire, although not to its very beginning. Constantine did not consecrate his city to the Holy Mother and the contemporary and later authors did not know about the connection between her and Constantinople.²³ In general, it is hardly possible to talk about the widespread Marian devotion before the third ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431 which ceremonially acclaimed her as *Theotokos*—the Mother of God. The establishment of this cult in the capital is a matter of scholarly debate and as such it is mainly focused on its real promotor.²⁴ Regardless of this fact, there is no sincere proof of extended Marian devotion before the late fifth century. In that time, the Church of *Theotokos* at *Chalcoprateia* and the famous reliquary chapel (*Hagios Soros*) at *Blachernai* were built.²⁵ The adjacent basilica, the most important Marian church in Constantinople, was however erected later, probably during the reign Justin I.²⁶ The later emperors supported the growing cult of the Holy Mother and by this way they were creating a new mystic connection with the masses.²⁷ Yet the inhabitants of Constantinople and the whole empire still identified Mary only as the Holy Mother who took credit for the salvation of mankind, but they did not consider her as a collective patron of their capital just yet. There is almost no trace of such a belief in times of the emperor Justinian, although that era is marked by many natural disasters, famines, and pandemics of plague.²⁸ It was only the *Prokopios* of *Kaisareia* who expressed the belief

that Mary—more precisely her churches in Pege and Blachernai located in front of the Theodosian Walls—was the real spiritual protector of Constantinople.²⁹

But although Justinian and later Roman emperors continued to spread the cult of the Holy Mother in Constantinople, no author from these times emphasizes her role in the protection of the Byzantine capital. The greatest among the hymnographers, Romanos the Melodist, stressed the protective role of Christ's Mother, but he lacks a clear connection with Constantinople.³⁰ The motif of Mary as the protector appears in sources prior to Avar siege in 626, but only very rarely.³¹ The most well-known Marian hymn, the Akathistos, originally served to celebrate the divine birth of Christ from the immaculate Virgin. Only much later, thanks to the second prologue, it became an ode to victory and symbol of the invincibility of Constantinople.

Mary was not considered as a military champion, and imperial armies in that era did not use her images as military banners. The city was still looking for its future patron. After the death of Justinian, the enemies from the north—the Avars and the Slavs—reached the proximity of the Byzantine capital. At the end of the sixth century, its inhabitants even considered to abandon the city and to move to the Asian side of the Bosphorus.³² Nevertheless, not even in these difficult times we did not hear anything about anyone begging for Mary's protection and support. The idea of Justinian's historian Prokopios who considered the Marian churches as the spiritual guardians of Constantinople was rather an isolated testimony of that era.

The political and social crisis culminated at the beginning of the seventh century during the civil war between Emperor Phokas and his rival Herakleios. The inhabitants of the Roman Empire perceived this fratricidal conflict sensitively and were watching the rising military exploits of the Persians with fear. They gradually began to lose faith in their earthly authorities.³³ George of Pisidia rhetorically describes the arrival of the future Emperor Herakleios to the capital. There was a portrait of Mary on his flagship, which was probably painted on cloth. It is possible that it served as a military banner which could have been unfurled and shown to the enemies.³⁴ Twenty years later, Herakleios started his campaign against the Persians. He symbolically entrusted the protection of Constantinople to the Holy Mother before the beginning of his expedition against the Persians in 622.³⁵ But Constantinople was attacked by the Avars the following year. During this attack, the people of the city speedily took the

precious garment of the Virgin Mary from her church in Blachernai to the safety of the Hagia Sophia. After some time, the patriarch Sergios had this relic deposited to its original place.³⁶ The details of this ceremony are specified in an anonymous sermon (BHG 1058) usually attributed to Theodore Synkellos, similarly as his homily on the Avar siege. The connection of the Holy Mother with “her” city was clearly formed for the first time in this text. Characteristically, at the end the author calls on the Holy Mother for protection:

Preserve your grace eternally for your city and let not in future the eye of man behold the tottering of the divine church or the desertion of this your humble city. Turn away from it every barbarian of whatever race, who plots hostility against it, making manifest that the city is fortified by your power. And whatever souls and cities have been defeated by barbarians, raise them all and redeem them, for you have power to do anything.³⁷

It was only the real siege of Constantinople that convinced the inhabitants that they were under the direct protection of the Holy Mother. This belief did not arise sooner, although its traces can be found in the previous era.³⁸ The Avar siege of 626 undoubtedly established a specific relationship between Mary and her city.³⁹ In the works of contemporary authors, a new protector (or rather protectress) of the city started to be mentioned. The authors simply reflected on the opinion of the period and the general belief of the masses which was being reinforced by the actions of the church. The origin of the later idea of Constantinople being consecrated to Mary, who assumed the female protective principle securing the welfare of the urban community, was formed in Constantinople only gradually. We would like to mention, as a matter of interest, that a deeper visual connection between Constantinople and Mary appeared on Byzantine coins only in the fourteenth century.⁴⁰

The Byzantines would never have taken the victory over the Avars as the Holy Mother’s miracle had it not appear near her precious shrine at Blachernai. A great moment for this church arose on the tenth day of the siege. The crushing defeat of the Slavic canoes became the central motif of salvation. The inhabitants became eyewitnesses of a collectively experienced dramatic performance which took place right in front of their eyes. The reactions to this unusual experience are found in sources from the period. The official report on the siege preserved in the Paschal Chronicle has a gap in this very place. Nevertheless, it is mentioned that the Avar khagan was defeated in one moment by the sea. At this point, the first initiators of the miracle are revealed: God and the Holy Mother, who

interceded with him for the people of the city.⁴¹ After the destruction of the Slavic ships, the Avar khagan allegedly himself said, “I see a woman in stately dress rushing about on the wall all alone.”⁴²

We do not know whether these words were mentioned in the original text of the official report or if they were added a bit later by the compiler. In any case, they are not a fact but rather a spiritual explanation of the defeat of the barbarians. After all, it was as if the khagan himself was admitting that nobody was protecting the city except for the mysterious female warrior in whom the images of pre-Christian (Athena and Tyche-Anthousa) and the Christian cult (the Virgin Mary) were reflected.⁴³

During the naval battle of Salamis in 480 BC, a mysterious woman figure appeared in front of the Greeks, and she encouraged them to attack the Persian fleet. Nobody doubted that it was the patroness of Athens.⁴⁴ The last time this pagan goddess saved her own city was in 396—at that time from the attack of Alaric, the King of the Visigoths. The last pagan historian of the Roman Empire, Zosimos, wrote about her appearance in front of the walls.⁴⁵ Athena was in general considered as a symbol of a protective urban deity. She also had her temple in pre-Christian Constantinople. There was even a grand sculpture of her wearing military clothing and a helmet which stood in the city until its destruction in 1204.⁴⁶

For the people of late antiquity, the epiphany—in other words, a supernatural manifestation of divine power—was an explanation of an unexpected victory or salvation.⁴⁷ Such visions were already spread in the world of Ancient Greece.⁴⁸ After a certain time, a similar explanation appeared among Christian authors who had grown up reading ancient works. However, this time the cities were saved by Christian saints—their new patrons—instead of pagan gods. This happened for the first time during a Persian siege of Nisibis in 350.⁴⁹ King Shapur I did not see a Christian saint on the walls at that time but rather a figure which he considered to be the Roman Emperor Constantius I. The defenders of the city informed him that the emperor was not in the city. The scared Shapur supposedly had the siege equipment burned, and he withdrew from the vicinity of the city.⁵⁰

More supernatural visions begin to appear in the works of the Greek authors around the middle of the sixth century. It was in a time of culminating social crisis in the late antique Roman Empire. In 542, a huge army at once appeared on the walls of the Syrian city of Sergioupolis. The Persian king Khusro I, who intended to conquer the city, reportedly saw

this miraculous appearance as well. The inhabitants thanked their own patron—the martyr Sergios—for this salvation.⁵¹

Soldiers supposedly appeared before the Avar khagan, who was besieging the Thracian city of Drizipera (present-day Çorlu in the European part of Turkey). The historian Theophylaktos Simokattes claims that it was only his own vision.⁵² During the first great Slavic siege of Thessalonica in 586, the figure of a local patron—Saint Demetrios—appeared on the city walls.⁵³ He was the one who supposedly led the troops which saved the city. One of the Slavic deserters told the defenders that he saw “a fiery, blazing man, sitting on a white horse and dressed in white clothing”.⁵⁴ A similar appearance occurred also during another Slavic attack on the city dated around 615/616.⁵⁵ In 614 angels had appeared on the city walls in Jerusalem fighting off the Persians. Every single one of these heavenly guardians supposedly had a shield and a flaming lance. The highest archangel unexpectedly called them off three days before the city fell, because God had decided he would hand over the holy city into the hands of the enemies.⁵⁶

The Holy Mother, or at least an unknown female figure, appeared in Constantinople during the Avar attack also in the report of George Kedrenos from the twelfth century. According to him, one day she came out of an unnamed gate of Blachernai in the company of eunuchs. The attackers initially thought it was the wife of Emperor Herakleios, and they let her pass. Eventually they began to follow her, but she disappeared unexpectedly in a place called the Old Rocks (Palaia Petra)—somewhere in the vicinity of the area of Kosmidion (present-day Eyüp).⁵⁷ In the forthcoming confusion, the barbarians began to kill each other until the evening. On the following day, when the Avar khagan found out that the most of his army had been killed, he returned to his own lands.⁵⁸ Kedrenos’s report is, of course, a legend. He did not even call the Avars by their proper name.

Mary had her last grand vision in Constantinople in 1422. This is according to the historian John Kananos, who undoubtedly spoke in the name of his fellow citizens. The city was at that time being besieged by the Ottoman troops of Sultan Murad II who almost managed to get through the considerably damaged walls. Suddenly, a woman dressed in purple appeared on the breastworks of the outer wall. In that way, the Mother of God terrified the enemies and saved the city.⁵⁹

During the Avar siege, however, she not only appeared on the walls but she alone directly destroyed the enemy in the Golden Horn. It was the real Holy Mother who sunk the Slavic boats in the Golden Horn.

Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia, both eyewitnesses to the siege, developed this motif in their works. They were both in the service of Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios and they very likely knew and influenced each other. Similar ideas are mostly found in the description of the destruction of the Slavic monoxyles. Mary's miracle is compared to the Old Testament devastation of the Pharaoh's army in the waves of the Red Sea. The Holy Mother's dwelling in Blachernai became the central place of the miracle. Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia do not perceive this church only as a traditional cult place but also as the seat of a heavenly being. The imminence of its profanation by the enemies would cause a well-deserved act of revenge, and it unquestionably has its distant literary model in antiquity.⁶⁰ On the other hand, the activities of the Holy Mother in favour of the defenders, as A. Kaldellis recently pointed out, remained obscure to some extent in the works of both authors.⁶¹

Theodore Synkellos specifically emphasizes the connection of the church in Blachernai with the area where the battle took place in two parts of his homily. First, he observes that the canoes were sunk near the Church of the Theotokos, and then he explicitly adds that the Holy Mother herself ordered defenders to pretend the retreat so that she could defeat the barbarians in front of her own shrine.⁶² George of Pisidia ironically asks why the barbarians settled down in the place of Mary's home if they owned the whole sea.⁶³ Both authors highlighted Mary's suddenly miracle, but they describe it differently. Theodore Synkellos explicitly claims that it was the Virgin Mary who won this fight, because she stepped into the fight in front of her church as a fighter of the Roman army. This motif was developed even more by George of Pisidia who let Mary directly enter the fight. According to him, she was the one who "was shooting, hurting, counter-attacking with a sword, and capsizing and sinking the boats".⁶⁴ The Holy Mother's strike as written by George of Pisidia evokes again the activity of the goddess Athena, which is intensified by the use of a similar means of expression.⁶⁵

Theodore Synkellos puts an emphasis on the supernatural intervention realized exclusively through Mary's will. After her intervention, the enemies and their ships were sunk in the sea in the style of the Red Sea crossing miracle of the Israelites. Theodore Synkellos describes Moses as Mary's predecessor in a way.⁶⁶ In George of Pisidia's poem, the ancient Old Testament miracle does not appear in the description of the battle but rather at its end. The poet compares the blood-coloured bay to the Red Sea and sees the khagan as a new Pharaoh and Patriarch Sergios as a new

Moses. Essentially, the author visualizes the biblical punishment that befell the enemies of God.⁶⁷ The means of this punishment is once again water, which can heal believers in the church and at the same time cleanse the sins of the enemies by sinking them into the depths of the Golden Horn.⁶⁸

The motif of the storm recalling Moses's victory in the Red Sea turned into an inseparable part of later versions of the Avar siege. Some compilers based their reports on Theodore Synkellos's homily or its epitomes and further reproduced this motif. In the historical prologue to the Feast of the Akathistos (*Diegesis Ophelimos*), the division of the sea into two parts is mentioned which refers to the original biblical model even more.⁶⁹ The remaining reports belonging to this group contained neither additional details nor further motives.⁷⁰ In the Byzantine chronography, only few authors mentioned the motif of the storm at the end of the Avar siege. According to the legendary report of George Kedrenos, it only broke during the return of the besiegers through the Black Sea.⁷¹ The anonymous compiler of the Synopsis Chronicle from the thirteenth century, however, correctly stated that this happened at Blachernai and as such it resembled Moses's victory in the Red Sea.⁷²

The Old Testament typology is more extensively developed in a homily traditionally attributed to the Constantinopolitan patriarch Germanos I. The Virgin acts here as the symbolic staff of Moses performing miracles. Through it, Christ punishes the Avars as well as the Arabs who besieged the city in 717/718.⁷³ The comparison to the Old Testament model also contains a homily ascribed to Emperor Theodore II Doukas Laskaris composed for the Feast of the Akathistos. Its author refers to a destruction of the imitators of the Egyptian army who drowned into the sea in the pharaonic way.⁷⁴ In the twelfth century, this idea was expressed again in poetic form by the Byzantine chronicler Constantine Manasses and the court poet Manganeios Prodromos.⁷⁵

The motif of the naval battle and the subsequent destruction of the enemy fleet by storm became an inseparable part of later reports of the Avar siege. And not only that, it also occurred in the descriptions of later attacks on Constantinople, as in the case of the first Arab attack on Constantinople during the reign of the Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV, usually dated between 674 and 678.⁷⁶ Certainly, from the ninth century, if not earlier, this siege formed a core part of the Byzantine liturgical tradition.⁷⁷ According to the Byzantine sources, the Arab attacks lasted for seven years. This is, however, problematic and in fact refers only to a later *Chronographia* of Theophanes.⁷⁸ The Arab ships were allegedly destroyed

by a storm but only on their return journey close to the southern coast of Asia Minor.⁷⁹ As recently pointed out by M. Jankowiak, the final form of the first Arab siege report is a consequence of the crude editorial work of Theophanes. It reminds us of his treatment with the sources of the Avar siege of Constantinople and Shahrbaraz's story with the intercepted letter.⁸⁰ Similarly as in the case of the Avar siege, Theophanes's report on the Arab siege of Constantinople was also based on two independent reports: a local one (possibly the chronicle of Trajan the Patrician) and the well-known Eastern source. Theophanes tried to logically connect them into one narrative, but his editorial work rather looks like an amalgam of two independent historical events. One of them was the Arab siege of Constantinople, which probably took place in the spring of 668, and the other was the destruction of the Arab fleet by the Byzantines near the coast of Pamphylia either late in 673 or in 674. The memory of the first Arab siege of Constantinople is preserved as a separate commemoration, although without any further historical background.⁸¹ While this attack did eventually form a part of historical prologues to the Feast of the Akathistos, reports on it are only based on the chronicle of Theophanes.⁸²

In the legends related to the second Arab siege of Constantinople in 717/718, the motif of a storm appears no sooner than after the departure of the Arab fleet. Almost all the Byzantine reports suggest that the Arab ships sunk as a result of bad weather.⁸³ The definite destruction of the enemy did not happen in front of Constantinople but rather in the Marmara and Aegean Seas. According to Theophanes, only ten ships were allegedly saved out of the whole Arab fleet. Out of these, five were captured by the Byzantines while the others sailed to Syria to announce the great deeds of God to the Arabs.⁸⁴ The motif of the storm is also expressed in the semi-legendary report on the first attack of the Rhos on Constantinople from 860 preserved by Symeon Magister and Logothetes.⁸⁵ According to this, the attackers were destroyed near Constantinople. We would like to return to this version in the other part of this book.⁸⁶ The other sources, however, testified, that the Russians were caught by a storm but no sooner than in the Black Sea during their return journey.⁸⁷

The supernal intervention of the Holy Mother in the Golden Horn became a permanent part of the historical memory of the Avar attack. It represented an archetypal model of the punishment of the enemy used also by the later descriptions of further attacks on Constantinople. And not only that. As it will be shown later, it will also occur in the form of the

permanent visual manifestation on the wall paintings and icons from the fourteenth century onwards.

NOTES

1. *Chronicon Paschale*, 716.9–16 (the English translation by Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby 1989, 169–170).
2. Theodore Synkellos, 298.34–35.
3. Theodore Synkellos, 299.4.
4. Theodore Synkellos, 298.26–27.
5. Theodore Synkellos, 303.19.
6. Theodore Synkellos, 302–303.
7. Theodore Synkellos, 304.9–12.
8. Theodore Synkellos, 306.1–4.
9. Theodore Synkellos, 313.9–10.
10. Theodore Synkellos, 312.19–22.
11. Theodore Synkellos, 319.35–320.5.
12. Theodore Synkellos, 320.25–29.
13. Cf. Fenster 1968, 100–101.
14. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 1–9, 156. Cf. also, Germanos 18, 196.
15. Weyl-Carr 2000, 330.
16. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 145–147, 166.
17. Kaldellis 2013, 139–143.
18. Kazhdan 1987, 202 and 226.
19. *Patmos Vita* (BHG 365n) 5, 79.24–25.
20. *Patmos Vita* (BHG 365n) 8, 83.19–84.26.
21. George Kedrenos, 495.22–496.9; John Zonaras, 13.3, 14.5–10; Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos, 8.26, col. 100–101.
22. *Diegesis* (1402), 110.30–32.
23. According to the church historian Eusebios (*Vita Constantini*, 3.48), Constantine the Great consecrated his city to the God of Martyrs. On the other hand, preserved information about festivities connected with the consecration of Constantinople lack any indication of having a Christian character. Cf. Berger 2003, 204–215 and 2011, 7–20. These sources also mention Constantine's consecration of the city to Tyche, who got the name Anthousa (Flourishing). Bardill 2012, 251–255. Tyche represented here a personification of the city rather than a real goddess. Cf. Shelton 1979, 28–29; cf. also Frolov 1944, 75–85 and Limberis 1994, 14–29.
24. Cf. among others, Av. Cameron 1978, 79–108; Limberis 1994, 47–61; Mango 2000, 17–25; James 2005, 145–152; Pentcheva 2006, 11–21. For general critical overview, cf. Meier 2003, 502–518.

25. Mango 2000, 19; Krausmüller 2011, 222–224.
26. Mango 2000, 19–20.
27. On this tendency, cf. Cameron 1978, 82–89, 95–108; Mango 2000, 20–21; Krausmüller 2011, 219–221.
28. Only one Syriac chronicler (Ps.-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, 97–98) mentioned that during the bubonic plague of 542, some people in Constantinople were convinced that they protected by the Holy Mother, the apostles, and the saints. A very late report preserved in the old French collection of Marian legends from the twelfth century even stated that the inhabitants were carrying the image of Mary during processions at that time. Cf. Adgar 220–223; also cf. Meier 2003, 524–525.
29. Prokopios *De Aedificiis*, 1.3, 21; Mango 2000, 21; Meier 2003, 512.
30. Meier 2003, 520.
31. Cf. the chapter “The Akathistos”.
32. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 7.15.4–7.15.6, 271–272.
33. Cf. Haldon 1997, 355–356.
34. George of Pisidia *Heraclias* 2, v. 12–18, 210; Theophanes, 298.16–17 (referring to George of Pisidia, but he mentioned several icons). Cf. Speck 1988, 54; 2003, 266–267 and Pentcheva 2002, 15.
35. George of Pisidia *Expeditio Persica* 1, v. 139–154, 80.
36. The date of this ceremony is still a matter of discussion, cf. recently Effenberger (2016, 323–325), who plausibly opts for 2 July 627 (at the earliest) but more probably one year later.
37. *In depositionem pretiosae vestis*, 18, 610–611 (for the English translation, cf. Av. Cameron 1979, 55–56).
38. On the contrary, Av. Cameron (1978, 89) concluded that the full emergence of Theotokos as special protector of Constantinople belongs to the late sixth century. Yet until the two attacks of the Avars at the beginning of the seventh century, no such precise expression can be found in the sources except Prokopios’s statement regarding the churches of Blachernai and Pege.
39. Av. Cameron 1979, 42.
40. Cutler 1975, 111–115; Belting-Ihm 1976, 56; Penna 2000, 212.
41. *Chronicon Paschale*, 724.18–20.
42. *Chronicon Paschale*, 725.9–11 (the English translation by Mich. and Mar. Whitby 1989, 180).
43. Limberis 1994, 123–129; Pentcheva 2006, 16–21; Kaldellis 2013, 141–142.
44. Herodotos, 8.84, 80, 82.
45. Zosimos, 5.6, 253.2–10.
46. Jenkins 1947 31–33; Pentcheva 2006, 64.
47. Nilsson 1955 1: 716; 2: 226–227.

48. Nilsson 1955 1: 716–717.
49. *Chronicon Paschale*, 538.
50. *Chronicon Paschale*, 538.14–15; cf. also Mich. Whitby and Mar. Whitby XXX, XVI. An almost identical version is preserved by Theophanes (40.4–6), who, however, asserted that the angel held the Emperor Constantius by the hand.
51. Evagrius, 4.28, 176.24–177.2.
52. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 6.5.4–6.5.7, 228.
53. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, I.13.120, 135. Cf. Lemerle 1981, 27–34.
54. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, I.14.161, 157.17–18.
55. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, II.1.188, 177.30–178.5
56. Strategios, 5.22–24.
57. On the topography of Palaia Petra cf. Janin 1964, 463 and Külzer 2008, 580–581. In the Typicon of the Great Church (Hagios Stauros 2:146), there is a mention of the regular procession to the Church of Theotokos.
58. George Kedrenos, 728.23–729.18.
59. John Kananos, 40.356–357.
60. Cf. Nilsson 1955 1: 124.
61. Kaldellis 2013, 139, 140.
62. Theodore Synkellos, 311.17–40.
63. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 440–445, 184.
64. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 454–455, 184.
65. Kaldellis 2013, 133–135, 141.
66. Theodore Synkellos, 311.26–29.
67. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 495–499, 188.
68. Pentcheva 2006, 63.
69. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1361B.
70. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (BHG 1063b), col. 874; *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Lipsiensis R II 25), col. 873–874.52–54; *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Parisinus Graecus 1587) col. 871–872; 48–50; *Historia Syntomos*, 335.36–37; *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352A; Antonios of Larissa, 135.20–136.6.
71. George Kedrenos, 729.16–18.
72. *Synopsis Chronike*, 108.28–109.1.
73. Ps.-Germanos, 12–20, 194–197.
74. Theodore Laskaris, 273.10–12 and 274.40–41.
75. Constantine Manasses, v. 3723–3725, 203. Cf. Septuagint Exodus 14:7, 109 (καὶ λαβῶν ἑξακόσια ἄρματα ἐκλεκτὰ καὶ πᾶσαν τὴν ἵππον τῶν Αἰγυπτίων καὶ τριστάτας ἐπὶ πάντων). Manganeios Prodromos, vv. 69–74, 22–23; 106–116, 24.
76. For the previous overviews of that siege, cf. Lilie 1976, 77–82; Tsangadas 1980, 107–133; Karapli 2009, 325–330.

77. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (BHG 1063b), 772.8–16.
78. Theophanes, 354.5–6.
79. This motif is completely absent in the works of Theophanes's contemporary, the patriarch Nikephoros. In the later prologue written for the Akathistos (*Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352C), the destruction of the Arab ships is credited to the intervention of the Holy Mother of God. The otherwise unattested Theodosios Grammatikos (130.14–15) compares the sinking of Arab ships to the destruction of the Pharaoh's troops, but the title of the poem mistakenly affirms that it happened under the reign of Emperor Herakleios. To which Arab siege this poem refers remains a matter of discussion. Cf. Olster 1995, 23–28; Gero 1973, 174; Jankowiak 2013, 302; O'Sullivan 2004, 80–81; Karapli 2009, 330–331.
80. Jankowiak 2013, 237–320; cf. also, Howard-Johnston 2010, 302–303 and 492–492, n. 13. For Shahrbaraz's story, cf. the chapter "Winners and Losers".
81. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (BHG 1063b), 772.8–16; *Patmos* 266, 83; Vasiliev 1946, 208.
82. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1364C; *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352C; cf. also Antonios Tripsychos, 5, 82.19–24; Antonios of Larissa, 137.25–138.12. The motif of a storm also appears by Ps.-Sebeos (50, 143–146) which puts the Arab attack in the era of the rule of Constans II (nowadays dated to 654). For commentary, cf. Thomson and Howard-Johnston 1999, 274–276 and O'Sullivan 2004, 67–88. The information about this attack has not been preserved in the Byzantine chronicles, and the attack is not documented in the local liturgical tradition.
83. Two storms are mentioned in the chronicle of Theophanes (399.6–19). One supposedly surprised the Arabs in the Marmara Sea and the second one in the Aegean Sea. Cf. also George Kedrenos, 790.2–11 and Nikephoros, 56, 124.4–126.2. Later entries in synaxaria and the historical prologues of the Akathistos also mention the destruction of the Arab fleet at sea. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1368B–C; *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352D–1353A; *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (BHG 1063b) 904.7–15. On these sources, cf. Speck 2002, 273–302. The motif of a storm together with the comparison with the Old Testament devastation of the Pharaoh's troops can be found in The Miracles of Archangel Michael by the deacon Pantaleon. For this entry, cf. Karapli 2009, 331–332.
84. Theophanes, 399.7–19.
85. Symeon Magister and Logothetes, 131.29, 245–247.
86. Cf. the chapter "The Sacred Iconography of the Siege".
87. *Poves' vremennykh let*, 13. In this connection Mango 1958, 76–88. The Brussels Chronicle (33.15–21), a reliable source, provides an exact date for

the attack and a report that the Russians were destroyed by the ever-glorified Holy Mother.

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The Akathistos

The fires of the burnt Avar siege machines had not yet gone out when the people and leaders of Constantinople gathered for a ceremonial procession culminating in a church service giving thanks at the central Marian church in Blachernai. One can only speculate about its character and the route it took. It could have been expected that Theodore Synkellos would provide the most information on this procession. He mentioned church services during the siege, but only in a general and purely rhetorical form: “The honourable high priest delivered himself to God as an incendiary sacrifice by the deadening of the body and by the godly unrest of the spirit; he did not ensure future salvation with the blood of bulls and billy goats but delivered bloodless sacrifices in the honourable temple of the Mother of God in Blachernai. He was constantly begging for the aversion of adversity by means of public litanies, so that the unconquered city would remain forever preserved.”¹ Although Synkellos emphasized the role of the honourable high priest, the patriarch Sergios, in the defence of the city, he did not directly mention in what manner he gave thanks to the Mother of God for saving Constantinople.²

On 7 August, after the definitive victory in the Golden Horn, Synkellos only mentioned that the patriarch and the young Emperor Herakleios Constantine with other high dignitaries went before the Golden Gate and offered spontaneous prayers to Theotokos.³ Probably at the end of that day, an official procession was organized by the patriarch to the church in

Blachernai where the thanksgiving service and perhaps an all-night vigil was performed. The first testimony of it has been preserved in the *Historia Syntomos* of the patriarch Nikephoros, which was compiled at the end of the eighth century. Nikephoros drew on a source compiled probably after 641.⁴ He states that after thwarting the Avar attack, the highest religious leaders of the city, the patriarch Sergios and the young Emperor Herakleios Constantine came to the holy church at Blachernai and paid tribute to the Mother of God offering her “the prayers of thanksgiving”.⁵

Such spontaneous celebration of victory soon became a regular commemoration of the Avar siege held every 7 August. The earliest proof of it contains the Lectionary (cod. Vat. gr. 2144) dated to the beginning of the ninth century.⁶ The next trace of it is probably preserved in the homily (BHG 1130s) and traditionally ascribed to the patriarch Germanos I of Constantinople.⁷ It describes the miraculous deliverance of the Byzantine capital from the Arabs in 717/718. The author of this text also highlighted the previous miracle during the attack of the Avars, and after mentioning it, he states the following: “This is how the Mother of God, worthy of all the praise, then showed us her great and incredible salvation. To commemorate her we shall annually perform this current festive celebration and an all-night singing to God.”⁸

At the turn of the ninth and tenth centuries, this regular commemoration contains also the Synaxarion-Typikon (Patmos 266), and from the middle of the tenth century, it is found in various liturgical collections, including the official Constantinople Synaxarion-Typikon (Hagios Stauros 40) and the Synaxarion of the Church of Constantinople compiled on the initiative of Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos.⁹

THE FEAST OF THE TRIUMPH

The church in Constantinople annually commemorated the traumatic experiences of the city. Under the domes of its temples, accompanied by the singing of liturgical hymns, the Byzantines became participants of a ritually repeated experience consolidating their common identity. The Avar attack on Constantinople had left indelible traces on those involved. The final salvation persuaded the people in the city of the grand mercy of God and his mother.

As the short entries preserved in the oldest liturgical collections show, the Avar attack was originally remembered as a separate commemoration of the fixed church calendar. However, according to the traditions of the

Orthodox church, the memory of this siege is inseparably connected with the Akathistos, the celebrated Marian hymn sung with the entire congregation standing.¹⁰ Over time, the Avar attack came to be seen as the first evidence of the Holy Mother's concern for the city. That might be the reason behind a later tradition that the Akathistos had been heard in Constantinople for the first time on the day of the final defeat of the Avars.

The hymn is now predominantly considered to have been composed before that date at some time after the third ecumenical council in 431 which conferred on Mary the status of the Theotokos.¹¹ Yet the postulated motifs which could serve for its more precise dating cannot be easily identified with a specific historical event.¹² The same is true for other criteria used for a more precise dating of this hymn. Equally, it is not clear what occasion caused its composition. It became a victorious ode only when its second prooimion or prologue was added. This was a short song of victory which was different from the remaining parts of the hymn in content and form. This prologue is well known under the title *Τῆ ὑπερμάχῳ στρατηγῷ* ("To you, our leader in battle and defender"). Thanks to this, the Akathistos became the most famous Marian hymn praising Mary as the Mother of God; at the same time, it emphasized her constant care for the destiny of Constantinople and its people. The origin of the second prologue is, however, still disputed. Could the patriarch Sergios be its author? The victorious atmosphere after the great victory over the Avars and the Slavs was undoubtedly an opportunity for such an introduction.¹³ Contemporary testimonies, however, do not explicitly suppose anything like this. Theodore Synkellos neither mention the second prologue of the Akathistos nor singing it after the end of the attack anywhere in his extensive sermon, which is distinguished by many references to the Old and New Testaments, but it did not quote any stanzas of the Akathistos.

On the other hand, some of Synkellos's expressions could show certain parallels with that hymn and its second prologue. As the first it is the comparison of Mary to the wall which appears twice in the Akathistos.¹⁴ Such a comparison does occur, if only very rarely, in sources written before the beginning of the seventh century. This can only be found in two genuine kontakia of Romanos the Melodist and in the kontakion "On Gabriel the Archangel", dated to later than the sixth century, which is not considered as an authentic part of his poetry.¹⁵ In what is probably the oldest of his kontakia (On the Nativity 1), written for the Christmas festival, Romanos compares Mary to "almighty protection, a wall, and support". In another kontakion (On the Nativity) acclaimed the

Virgin Mary as “a wall, foundation, and harbour”.¹⁶ These rhetorical images could be interpreted in the sense of military protection.¹⁷ However, they are related to the whole of humanity (oikoumene), and more precisely to the Christians.¹⁸ Theodore Synkellos used another comparison, for he speaks of Constantinople as “the town of God protected by the Virgin”.¹⁹

A further possible reference to the Akathistos hymn in Synkellos’s homily could be indicated by his use of the term “hypermachos” (literally, combatant for) in connection with the Virgin Mary.²⁰ Could Synkellos have been influenced by the second prologue of that hymn?²¹ That possibility is there, but it cannot be proven. Prior to 626, the term hypermachos is only used in the military context by the anonymous author of the second collection of The Miracles of Saint Demetrios, which stresses the protective role of this saint during the attack on Thessalonica by the Slavs commonly dated to 615 or 616.²² This reference is, however, undoubtedly later than Synkellos’s homily since the second collection of The Miracles of Saint Demetrios is usually dated to the 680s and 690s.²³

Synkellos’s companion, George of Pisidia, neither used the term “hypermachos” nor compared Mary to a wall. On the other hand, he directly calls Mary a “commander” (strategos).²⁴ Similarly to the term “hypermachos”, such an attribution of Mary does not appear prior to 626. Despite the use of the term “strategos”, George of Pisidia, just like Theodore Synkellos, does not refer to the second prologue or the singing of the Akathistos after the Avar siege anywhere in his poem *Bellum Avaricum*. Its concluding verses (502–508) cannot be taken as evidence of any such reference: “Let us then sing the hymn, not on drums / booming unrhythmically, but with the instruments / within us in mystical harmony; / and let us stretch the strings of the spirit, / our tongues for plectra and our lips as cymbals, / and with a five-stringed concord of the senses / let us sing the topmost to the lowest tone.”²⁵ As P. Speck pointed out some years ago, this motif refers to Moses’s Hymn during the crossing of the Red Sea by the Israelites, which is elaborated by both Georgios of Pisidia and Theodore Synkellos in connection with the defeat of the Slavs in the Golden Horn.²⁶

Based on the presented arguments, the potential reflection of the Akathistos hymn in the two contemporary testimonies of the Avar siege cannot be totally excluded.²⁷ However, such a suggestion is inconsistent with the emerging liturgical tradition connected with this siege. Neither the singing of the Akathistos nor the composition of the second prologue

is mentioned in any of the liturgical collections commemorating the anniversary of the Avar attack on 7 August.²⁸

A direct link between this hymn and the Avar siege appears in two much later liturgical texts: the first of these is currently known as the *Diegesis Ophelimos* (A Useful Narration), which is based on the initial words of its more extensive title: “A useful narration compiled from ancient histories, revealing the memory of a curious miracle when the Persians and the Barbarians encircled the imperial city [Constantinople] and died punished by God’s Judgement. Since then the city which was, thanks to the prayers of the Mother of God, preserved without any harm, thanksgiving is sung every year. This day was called the Akathistos.”²⁹

The *Diegesis* contains the material which was probably compiled into one narration in the second half of the ninth century.³⁰ The prologue reveals that the Feast of the Akathistos was established in Constantinople after the end of the Avar siege. However, it does not correspond to the content of the text. In addition to the Avar attack, two Arab sieges of Constantinople are mentioned. The first one took place during the reign of Constantine Pogonatos (Constantine IV) and is traditionally dated to 674–678.³¹ The next mention commemorated the siege under Emperor Leon III in 717/718. The *Diegesis* does not reveal that the patriarch Sergios introduced the Akathistos into the liturgy after the victory over the Avars or that he was the author of the second prologue to this hymn. Most importantly, the connection of the Akathistos with the Avar siege is only mentioned in the title of the *Diegesis* but not in any further part of this text.

It is not clear if the extensive title was an original part of the *Diegesis*.³² However, since it appears in several older manuscripts, it probably was not a later addition.³³ The first part of this text is in fact an abridged version of the sermon of Theodore Synkellos. It cannot be excluded that it originally served as a liturgical reading for a regular commemoration of the Avar siege held on 7 August.³⁴ However, Synkellos does not explicitly state that the patriarch Sergios organized the service of thanksgiving at the end of this attack.³⁵ Unlike this, the compiler (or his possible source) stated the following: “In memory of this benefaction (victory of the Avars), we carry out today’s annual popular church service and organize an all-night service, bringing the songs of thanksgiving to Her [=the Holy Mother].”³⁶ Yet, this addition is not only related to the singing of the Akathistos but also related to the regular liturgical commemoration of the Avar siege held annually on 7 August.

A deeper connection between the singing of the Akathistos and the Avar siege appears in much later text currently known by its Latin title *Lectio Triodii*, which is only traditionally ascribed to the Byzantine author Nikephoros Kallistos Xanthopoulos.³⁷ Like the Diegesis, the *Lectio* is a commemorative text describing the miracles of the Virgin Mary during the first three sieges of Constantinople. The compiler of the *Lectio* drew his information from various materials. For the Avar siege, he used an epitome of the homily of Theodore Synkellos. At the end of this part, he concludes that in honour of the Holy Mother and her intervention against the Avars, “the blessed people of Constantinople ... were singing the hymnos and the Akathistos to her the whole night.”³⁸ With regard to the above, the words “hymnos” and “Akathistos” resemble an innovation which was probably added to the text by its compiler. Such evidence undoubtedly refers to the already established Feast of the Akathistos. At least from the eleventh century onwards, this widespread liturgical celebration overshadowed the separate commemorations of the Avar siege and the other two Arab sieges of Constantinople. However, this was not the only addition of the compiler of the *Lectio*. At the end of the account on the Avar attack, he adds, “And since then, in commemoration of such a great and supernatural miracle, the Church accepted this feast to consecrate God on this day when the victorious trophy of the Mother of God came into existence. It was named the Akathistos because that is what all the people and the clergy of this city called it.”³⁹ The compiler of the *Lectio* explicitly stressed that the origin of the Feast of the Akathistos is related to the victory over the Avars, just as he asserts that the singing of this hymn became a part of this ceremonial church service. It must be added that this is a late testimony which was influenced by the popularity of the Akathistos in the late Byzantine period. He wanted to give great value to this hymn, and that is why he placed its introduction in the times of the first major siege of Constantinople in 626. As the compiler of the Diegesis, he made an apparent mistake. After the end of the Avar siege, only the annual commemoration on 7 August was fixed in the liturgical calendar. Furthermore, it is important to reassert that none of the liturgical readings that were read on this occasion mention the singing of Akathistos.

More problems arise when we look at the remaining part of the *Lectio*. After the end of the second Arab attack on Constantinople in 717/718, its author explicitly adds, “Due to of all these supernatural powers of the purest Mother of God, we have a celebration on this day and we call this

feast the Akathistos because that is when at night all the people sang the hymn to the Mother of the Word [Christ] while standing; although we usually sit for almost all the rest of the stanzas, we stand and listen when the Mother of God's stanza is sung."⁴⁰

The compiler of the *Lectio* thus mentions the implementation of the Akathistos twice: first after the end of the Avar siege and then after the end of the Arab siege of 717/718. But on that occasion, he reveals not only the origin of this hymn but also that of the homonymous feast. It is evident that the Akathistos, literally translated as "Not Sitting (hymn)", is different from other Marian songs as it was sung standing up. In addition to this, the compiler says that the introduction of the Feast of the Akathistos occurred as a consequence of "all of these supernatural miracles", by which he unequivocally refers to all three sieges of Constantinople. Thus, the victory over the Arabs in 718 became a specific reason for the origin of the Feast of the Akathistos. By its establishment, the first two of Mary's miracles which occurred during the first two sieges of Constantinople in 626 and 674–678 were commemorated as well.⁴¹

The *Lectio* is not the only important testimony that mentions this connection. Another one is a short Latin prologue to the Akathistos which clarifies the origin of this hymn and outlines its historical background. While its oldest copy appears in the Zürich Codex (Züricher Cod. C 78) from the ninth century, the original came into existence sooner, supposedly between 787 and 813.⁴² The author of this anonymous prologue mentions the circumstances of the Arab attack on Constantinople in 717/718, the beginning of which is wrongly dated to the reign of Byzantine Emperor Theodosios III. In the conclusion, he stated that the patriarch Germanos ordered an annual celebration to honour the victory over Arabs on the Feast of Annunciation on 25 March in the church in Blachernai and in "all the churches of Greece".⁴³ The Latin prologue is actually the first mention that matches the hymn Akathistos—albeit still unnamed—to a specific Marian feast.⁴⁴ However, a question arises, why the patriarch Germanos fixed such a celebration on the Feast of Annunciation if the commemoration of the departure of Arab army from Constantinople fell on 16 August according to the Byzantine liturgical tradition?⁴⁵ It is possible that the celebration established by Germanos was connected to the anniversary of the beginning of the rule of the Byzantine Emperor Leon III, the victor over the Arabs, who ascended the throne on 25 March 717.⁴⁶ The unknown Latin translator of the historical prologue and the hymn must have known Greek as all indices suggest that he drew

his information from Byzantine sources.⁴⁷ Despite its Latin form, this is a source which is more contemporary than the later Byzantine liturgical tradition.

It was more probably the patriarch Germanos who used the Akathistos hymn as the first to express thanks to the Mother of God for the victory. He was presumably the one who added or composed the new prologue to that hymn to express Mary's role as the saviour of Constantinople during the Arab siege of 717/718. Another proof of such a statement could be found in an interpolated letter of Pope Gregory II sent to the patriarch Germanos. The Roman pontiff mentioned there the deeds of the Holy Mother, who became "the leading warrior" of the Constantinopolitan patriarch.⁴⁸ Here Gregory used the Latin term *propugnatrix*, corresponding to the Greek word *hypermachē*, which was used in its adjective form in the title of the second prologue of the Akathistos.⁴⁹ Was this an allusion by the Pope to the Holy Mother's role during the Arab siege? It could not be ruled out that Gregory took this term from a (no longer extant) Greek letter of Germanos. In addition, the pope called the patriarch the leading warrior (*propugnator*) of the Church right at the beginning of his letter.⁵⁰ Germanos must have known quite well what role the Mother of God had played in the past in the protection of Constantinople, and it is no coincidence that he ordered a celebratory service be held in the Blachernai church to honour the victory over the Arabs. This sacral space had been considered the main Marian sanctuary since the triumph over the Avars and Slavs, and it was there where all-night church services had been held for a long time to honour this victory. The patriarch had to keep in mind that the deciding phases of both the Avar and Arab sieges had taken place in the sea and that in both cases the defenders of the city had triumphed over their enemies.

Until then, the memory of the Avar attack had been celebrated separately on 7 August. Germanos probably stood at the beginning of the transformation which once again emphasized the role of the Mother of God during the defence of Constantinople. Subsequently, the Akathistos was sung during the Feast of Annunciation, possibly also with new content which expressed thanks to the Mother of God for saving Constantinople. However, in the Latin prologue, the hymn was not yet presented under its current name. Its compiler descriptively says that it was a song which was rhythmically composed, "triumphant" (*victoriferus*), "full of thanks" (*salutatorius*), and dedicated to the Mother of God. These attributes were

very likely taken from the now lost Greek original from which he drew his information.

THE FEAST OF THE AKATHISTOS

It is not known who introduced the Feast of the Akathistos into Byzantine liturgy or when this was done. In any way, the decisive change probably came about after the end of iconoclasm in 843.⁵¹ The Akathistos was still being sung in the traditional time during the Feast of Annunciation as well as during a newly established church feast, later known as the Day or alternatively the Saturday of the Akathistos.⁵² The first report on it is probably found in the Patmos version of the Synaxarion-Typikon of the Great Church in Constantinople (Patmos 266) which contains liturgical instructions on various church feasts and anniversaries. This new feast is included here without a title, but it does mention an all-night celebration in Blachernai which, based on the patriarch's decision, was supposed to take place in "the middle [week of Lent] or in the one that follows it".⁵³ The singing of the Akathistos is, however, not explicitly mentioned. There is more information in a later version of the Typikon (Hagios Stauros 40) from the second half of the tenth century.⁵⁴ The feast did not yet have a specific name, but the period of the celebration was fixed on the Saturday in the fifth week of Lent. In contrast to the Feast of Annunciation, this new feast became a part of the movable church calendar.

An all-night church service would take place in the Blachernai church, where gratitude to the Mother of God for the liberation of Constantinople was expressed. The entry in the Hagios Stauros Typikon clearly mentioned "the Persians and the barbarians who encircled the city on various occasions" and that note undoubtedly refers above all to the first siege of Constantinople in 626 when the Mother of God took care of "her" city for the first time.⁵⁵ However, the singing of the Akathistos is not explicitly stated here either.

The Feast of the Akathistos with its accompanying text, the often mentioned *Diegesis Ophelimos*, finally became a part of the famous Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes as the only feast of the movable liturgical calendar within this collection. Such a decision undoubtedly contributed to its popularity in Byzantium and all Orthodox oikoumene. However, the manuscript tradition suggests that the Diegesis was not very widespread before its inclusion in Metaphrastes's Menologion.⁵⁶ Until that, that feast did not have a specific name and there was no mention of the singing of

the Akathistos. On the other hand, the oldest manuscripts of the ninth (or rather the ninth and tenth) volume of the Menologion of Symeon Metaphrastes come from the eleventh century and they contain the text of the *Diegesis Ophelimos* with its extensive title in which the mention of the Akathistos was connected to the Avar siege of Constantinople.⁵⁷ The definite establishment of the Feast of Akathistos could therefore be dated after its inclusion by Symeon Metaphrastes in his Menologion compiled between 976 and 1004.

NOTES

1. Theodore Synkellos, 320.10–15.
2. Theodore Synkellos, 303.14–15.
3. Theodore Synkellos, 312.39–313.4.
4. Cf. the chapter “The Memory of the Avar Siege”.
5. Nikephoros 13, 60.37–40.
6. *Kalendarium*, 65 (with the short notice referring to “the memory of the Avars in Blachernai” including the appropriate liturgical reading from the New Testament). Cf. also *Jaharis Gospel Lectionary*, 113. For the other manuscripts preserving the notice of this commemoration, cf. Lowden 2009, 32–33.
7. Cf. the chapter “The Memory of the Avar Siege”.
8. Ps.-Germanos, 17, 195. A very similar concluding note is preserved in the first part of the *Diegesis Ophelimos* (1364B) referring to the Avar siege of Constantinople. Originally, this part of Diegesis could be an independent Synaxarion used for the commemoration of the Avar attack (7 August). It could serve as an archetype for Ps.-Germanos. Cf. Speck 1986, 216–217; who, however, connected this notice with the siege of 717/718.
9. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (BHG 1063b), col. 872–876; *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Lipsiensis R II 25), 871–874; *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Parisinus Graecus 1587), 869–872. For Synaxaria-Typica, cf. *Patmos* 266, 101, n. 3 and 101, n. 4. *Hagios Stauros* 40: 1, 362.14–364.13.
10. On the structure of the Akathistos, cf. Wellesz 1953, 163–174; Trypanis 1968, 17–19; Meersseman 1958, 37; Grosdidier De Matons 1977, 53–54; Limberis 1994, 89–97; Peltomaa 2001.
11. For the complicated issue regarding the dating of the Akathistos and its authorship, cf. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1903, 5–13; Wellesz 1953, 151–152; Rehork 1962, 379–389; Trypanis 1968, 20–21; Grosdidier De Matons 1977, 55–56; Limberis 1994, 89–97; Kazhdan 1999, 70–71; Peltomaa 2001, 40–47; Pentcheva 2006, 12–16.

12. Meier 2003, 517–518.
13. Cf. for example: Frolow 1944, 93–97; Van Dieten 1972, 18–19; Waldmüller 1976, 281–282; Av. Cameron 1979, 22; Kaldellis 2013, 142.
14. *Akathistos Hymn*, 19.1–2, 37 and 23.13, 39. Cf. Peltomaa 2009, 290–291.
15. Romanos the Melodist *Cantica dubia*, 62, 15, 190.
16. Romanos the Melodist *Cantica genuina* 1, 23 and 35, 10.
17. Gador Whyte 2013, 82–83.
18. Meier 2003, 520.
19. Theodore Synkellos, 302.24–25 (τὴν πόλιν τοῦ Θεοῦ, ἦν ἡ παρθένος τετείχηκε). For this comment, cf. Peltomaa 2009, 290–291.
20. Theodore Synkellos 303.17–19 and 303.28–29.
21. Peltomaa 2009, 293.
22. *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, 2.1.188, 177.31; cf. Koder 1986, 527–528.
23. Barišić 1953, 144.
24. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 137 and 141, 164; v. 405, 182.
25. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 502–504, 188 (the English translation by Mar. Whitby 2003, 183).
26. Speck 1980, 60–61. A different explanation is given by Pertusi 1959, 224.
27. Peltomaa 2009, 295.
28. On the other hand, in one of the versions of the Chronicle of George Monachos (M, 612.13–15), the second prologue of the Akathistos is explicitly mentioned under the year 678 after the end of the Arab siege of Constantinople. However, in this case it is undoubtedly a later interpolation which is not considered as an original part of this chronicle. It occurs only in the Muralt edition based on cod. *Mosquensis* Bibl. Synod. Gr. 406 from the twelfth century. On this manuscript, cf. Wahlgren 2001, 252 and 2006, 36.
29. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1353–1354.
30. Barišić 1955, 170; Spadaro 1991, 259; Brzóstkowska 1995, 8; Speck 1986, 228.
31. Cf. however, the recent notes by Jankowiak 2013, 237–320.
32. Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1903, 14.
33. On the textual tradition of Diegesis, cf. Kösegi 2015, 20–34.
34. Speck 1986, 217.
35. Theodore Synkellos, 312.39–40–313.1–4 and 320.10–15.
36. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1364B.
37. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1348–1354. For this text, cf. the chapter “The Memory of the Siege”.
38. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1353B.
39. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352BC.
40. *Lectio Triodii*, 1353B.

41. Spadaro 1991, 252–253.
42. Huglo, 1951, 28–30; Meersseman 1958, 49–52; Spadaro 1991, 259.
43. *Hymnus Sancta Dei Genitricis Marie* 3, 103.
44. Fletcher 1958, 63.
45. Cf. Hatzidimitriou 1983, 183–207.
46. Theophanes, 412.24–25.
47. Théarvic 1904, 298; Meersseman 1958, 49–50, 52.
48. Gregory II, 154D. On the problem of its authenticity, cf. Speck 1981, 155–156 and Brubaker and Haldon 2011, 93–94.
49. Huglo 1951, 53–54; Wellesz 1953, 152; Speck 1981, 169–171; 2002, 170–171. However, Meersseman (1958, 44) points out that the Latin translation of the Akathistos hymn uses a masculine form of this term (*propugnatori*) in connection with the Virgin Mary.
50. Gregory II, 147B.
51. Meersseman 1958, 48; Spadaro 1991, 263–264.
52. For the manuscript tradition, cf. Kösegi 2015, 20–34.
53. *Patmos* 266, 124. Huglo 1951, 50.
54. Mateos 1962:1, XVIII–XIX.
55. *Hagios Stauros 40: 2*, 52.20–54.24.
56. Kösegi 2015, 33.
57. Kösegi 2015, 20–27.

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The Sacred Iconography of the Siege

In Constantinople, the Avar attack was annually commemorated as an independent liturgical feast in the Blachernai Church of the Mother of God.¹ The faithful learned about its meaning through repeated words as well as permanent visual decoration. Its only concrete proof is the celebratory inscriptions ascribed to George of Pisidia that were originally located in this Marian church. Based on their content, it can be assumed that the interior of this sacred space was once composed of scenes depicting the defeat of the Avars and Slavs in the Golden Horn.² It is probable that these scenes were the only proof of sacred iconography of the Avar siege for a long time.

A change of this perspective occurred with the emergence of the Feast of the Akathistos which united the memory of the three historical sieges of Constantinople in Byzantine liturgy.³ In such a way, the Avar siege was revived not only by the liturgical readings used for this occasion but also by the singing of the Akathistos hymn, especially by its second prologue, in which gratitude to the Mother of God for her saving Constantinople was expressed. At least from the middle of the fourteenth century, various painters begin to immortalize individual stanzas of the Akathistos hymn on the walls of their monasteries and churches.⁴ However, the second prologue (or first kontakion) of the Akathistos was very rarely illustrated in the Byzantine era. It appeared as a symbolical representation of the Mother of God on the throne raising her hand in prayer, as can be seen on

two late Greek manuscripts—the Synod. gr. 429 (Moscow, mid-14th century) and Cod. 19 (R. I. 19, Madrid, Escorial Library, 14th/15th century).⁵ Another example of the second prologue appears on the Greek icon “Praise to the Mother of God with the Akathistos” from the last quarter of the fourteenth century from the Cathedral of the Dormition in Kremlin (Moscow). It shows the ecclesiastical procession in front of the icon of the Virgin Hodegetria in the presence of an imperial couple and other dignitaries.⁶

AKATHISTOS CYCLE

In the Byzantine era, the illustration of the second prologue is almost absent in the wall paintings of the Akathistos pictorial cycle. There are just two exceptions. At the Church of Peribleptos at Ohrid (Republic of Macedonia), the text of the prologue is directly inscribed in Greek above the northern entrance without any accompanying illustration, probably because the Ohrid masters had no space on the wall to fit the corresponding scene.⁷ A different representation of the second prologue can be found in the interior of St Peter’s Church on the island of Golem Grad on the Lake Prespa (Republic of Macedonia). The wall paintings of the Akathistos cycle were executed there in the second half of the fourteenth century (probably during the 1360s). The second prologue is represented by a historical scene of the siege of Constantinople on the exterior south wall of this church. It is a unique fresco, although some scholars sometimes postulate an existence of older representations of that type.⁸ If that was the case, they should be undoubtedly sought in Constantinople—the primary centre of the Marian cult in the Orthodox Byzantine world (Fig. 13.1).

The mural painting from Saint Peter’s Church is partially damaged, but a detailed sketch of this scene is long available thanks to G. Krstevski. There is a city with its walls in triangular shape together with its defenders. On the walls, two young-looking figures are holding a rectangular board in their hands, which is probably an icon of the Theotokos.⁹ The figure of a cleric (patriarch?) standing on the wall dips a piece of cloth into the water. The resulting composition of this mural painting probably unites into one at least two historical sieges of Constantinople. The central scene with the cleric dipping a piece of cloth reflects the legendary motif of the first Russian attack on the Byzantine capital in 860. In the Byzantine sources, it is mentioned for the first time in the Chronicle of Symeon Magister and Logothetes from the second half of the tenth century. This

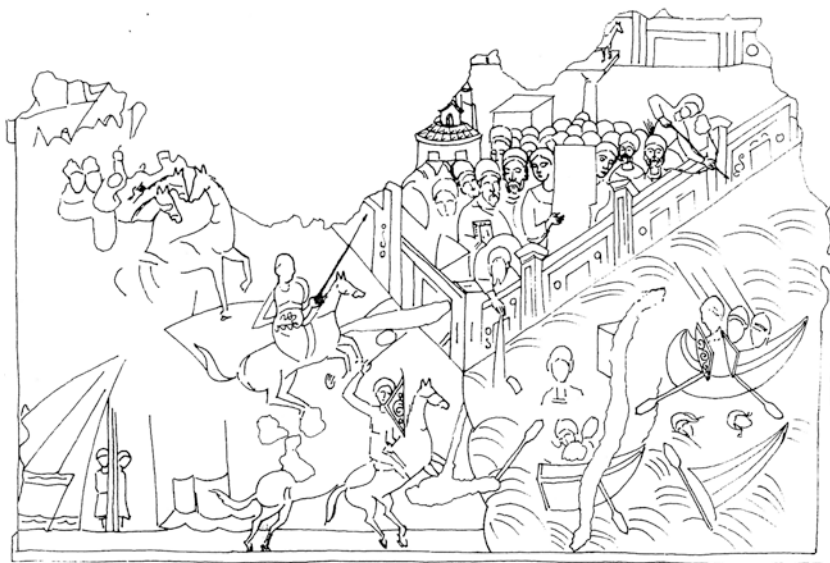


Fig. 13.1 The Siege of Constantinople, ca. the 1360s, exterior mural, south wall, Church of St. Peter, Golem Grad, Prespa; drawing by G. Krstevski

miraculous rescue of Constantinople supposedly occurred with the assistance of the famous patriarch Photios, who dipped the edge of the Virgin's *omophorion* into the waters of the Golden Horn. With this mystical act, he allegedly provoked a storm which sank the Scythian (Russian) vessels.¹⁰ Photios alone, however, calls this relic a *περιβολή* (covering) in his fourth homily commemorating the first Russian attack, and he only mentioned a procession with it along the walls of Constantinople.¹¹ Present commentators conclude that Photios dipped into the sea either the *maphorion*, the garment covering the head and shoulders of the Virgin, or her robe.¹² However, Symeon Magister and Logothetes clearly call this relic an *omophorion*, using a Greek word designating a piece of vestment with crosses worn around the neck, shoulders, and breasts of clerics.¹³ Could the visual scene of the siege of Constantinople at Prespa be based on the account of Symeon Magister and Logothetes? This can be done only with great difficulty because Symeon mentions that both Photios and Emperor Michael III performed the ceremony of dipping this relic into the sea. The scene of the siege of Constantinople is evidently a part of the Akathistos pictorial cycle. However, it is well known that only the first

three sieges of the Byzantine capital were commemorated during this liturgical feast, whereas the attack of the Rhos in 860 was not included.¹⁴ Such a conflation of motifs from the two different sieges of Constantinople has rather a different origin. In a homily attributed to Emperor Theodore II Doukas Laskaris, composed in honour of the Feast of the Akathistos, Mary is not punishing the Slavs but the Rhos with her girdle.¹⁵ The term “Scythians”, by which the later Byzantine authors called the Avars, was later used for naming the Russians. The two Byzantine chronicles from the thirteenth century have a short entry on the attack of the Scythians (Avars) on Constantinople of 626, but they both labelled the dug-out canoes (monoxyles) used by this siege as Russian ones.¹⁶ In one of the manuscript versions of the Slavonic version of the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses, there is a marginal note which linked the Tauroscyths, who attacked Constantinople in 626, to the Russians.¹⁷

The Russian pilgrims who visited Constantinople in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries testified such a conflation of the two different sieges. They indisputably received information from local guides when visiting various historical sites and sacral objects in the city. Their accounts roughly chronologically correspond with the creation of the mural painting on the island of Golem Grad. According to one such report coming from Alexander the Clerk, the robe the Holy Mother of God (*riza sviatej Bogorodici*) saved Constantinople against the attack of enemies from land and sea. The pilgrim added that this happened by means of the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios, who dipped her robe into the sea. Then the “sea boiled up and the enemy fled”.¹⁸ According to another report, that of Stephen of Novgorod:

The Persian Emperor Chosroes attacked Constantinople and was about to take the city. There was great lamentation in Constantinople, but then God appeared to a certain holy old man and said, ‘Take the girdle of the holy Mother of God and dip its end into the sea.’ This they did with chanting and lamentation, and the sea was aroused and destroyed their [the Persians’] boats at the city wall. Even now their bones shine white as snow at the city wall near the Jewish Gate.¹⁹

Stephen even stated that this miracle was also recorded in the Russian books.²⁰

These two reports suggest that the local guides familiarizing the pilgrims with the miracles which occurred during the attacks on Constantinople evidently combined the motifs of the Avar and Russian

attacks of 626 and 860. The central scene at Prespa rather reflects these present legends than that of Symeon Magister and Logothetes. The unnamed patriarch alone (Sergios rather than Photios) dips into the sea something that resembles more a vestment than an omophorion, and one of the Russian pilgrims clearly identified this as a “robe” (riza). Such a conflation of the various sieges of Constantinople was a typical product of the late Byzantine era and not only in visual art. Over the passage of time, enemies lost their own historical contours. Individual scenes from various attacks were illustrated as one timeless miracle. When depicting the rough sea which destroyed the enemy fleet, the painter at Prespa could draw his inspiration from the failure of the naval attack of the Slavic monoxyles during the Avar siege as well as from the destruction of other Scythians (the Rhos).

MOLDAVIAN MURAL PAINTINGS

A scene from Saint Peter’s Church at Prespa is the only preserved iconographic example of the commemoration of the Avar siege of Constantinople within the Feast of the Akathistos which comes from the Byzantine era. It could have been expected that such depictions would lose their historical justification after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Paradoxically, such scenes reappeared in a different cultural area, more than a hundred years after the fall of the Byzantine Empire. They came into existence in a relatively short time between 1530 and 1541 in the Danubian Principality of Moldavia (modern-day Romania). They originally covered the outer walls of eleven churches and can be currently found on three of them. The remaining mural paintings containing this scene are either lost or very badly preserved and poorly visible.²¹

Out of these three churches, the oldest scenes can be seen in the complex of the Humor Monastery on the southern facade of the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin (1535). They schematically portray the city and a procession in the presence of the emperor, the empress, and other dignitaries who are carrying the icon. The soldiers behind the walls are shooting at the defenders with cannons. Some of them are portrayed wearing white fezzes while others have white sashes wrapped around dark turbans. We can also clearly see a smaller area separated by water where the enemy’s ships are sinking (Fig. 13.2).²²

The most well-preserved painting of the Constantinople siege comes from the Church of Annunciation in the Moldovița Monastery.²³ The whole composition was finished in 1537 and is divided into three parts. In



Fig. 13.2 The Siege of Constantinople, 1535, exterior mural, south wall, Church of the Dormition of the Virgin, Humor Monastery, Moldavia, modern-day Romania Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Alice Isabella Sullivan

the centre stand Constantinople and its walls with a ceremonial procession taking place on the perimeter. There is also a Church Slavonic inscription above the city walls (“Here is Tsargrad,”) referring explicitly to the Byzantine capital.²⁴ The easily recognizable figures of deacons, priests, and bishops are dressed in ceremonial robes. The emperor, his courtiers, and the empress also form part of the procession. The clergy are carrying crosses with the gospel in their hands, while the end of the procession features common people and monks carrying an icon of the Mother of God (the Hodegetria type) and an image not made by human hands (*acheiropoietos*) which typologically corresponds to the Mandyllion of Edessa (Fig. 13.3).

The attackers are depicted with white fezzes and turbans in a similar way as on the Humor Monastery. Although they are firing at the city with cannons, there are clearly visible droplets of rain or fire falling from the sky onto the destroyed ships of the enemy, clearly indicating a sort of miraculous intervention in the course of the siege. The cannons, turbans, fezzes, and Oriental clothing give the impression that the painters were depicting the last siege of the Holy Mother’s city, which was by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 under Sultan Mehmed II.²⁵

In 1930 a leading expert on Byzantine iconography, A. Grabar, found the following Church Slavonic inscription under a man operating a cannon on the walls and a group of deacons: “They indeed painted the famous Constantinopolitan victory over the Scythian khagan. Why do they not paint their poverty and the ruin they suffered from the Saracen emir when he conquered Constantinople?”²⁶ According to this anonymous commentator, the painters were not depicting the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453 but rather the victory over the Scythian khagan from the distant past.



Fig. 13.3 The Siege of Constantinople, details showing the large fortified city, 1537, exterior mural, south wall, Church of the Annunciation, Moldovița Monastery, Moldavia, modern-day Romania. Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Alice Isabella Sullivan

The scenes of the siege of Constantinople in Moldovița and in other Moldavian churches represent a special addition to the pictorial cycle of the Akathistos hymn.²⁷ Therefore, in fact, they depicted not the last siege of Constantinople but, on the contrary, the first one in 626. Its key element represents the miracle of the Mother of God, who intervened in favour of the defenders of the former Byzantine capital.²⁸ The sinking ships on the rough seas recall the destruction wrecked on the dug-out canoes of the enemy in the Golden Horn on 7 August 626. The paintings in all churches depict this miracle and not the greatest defeat of Orthodox Christianity, which was inflicted on the city by the Ottoman Turks. The motifs of miraculous whirlwind from the sky, the destroyed vessels, and the liturgical procession with the icon of the Hodegetria and the acheiropoietos of Christ were all based on liturgical texts commemorating the first victory of the defenders of Constantinople over their enemies in 626 within the Feast of the Akathistos. The mention of the Scythian khagan in the already mentioned inscription from Moldovița possibly refers to the Church Slavonic version of

the Greek historical prologue to the Feast of the Akathistos—the *Lectio Triodii*.²⁹ In that liturgical text, and other such sources as well, only the Avars were labelled as “Scythians”.³⁰

The wall paintings of the Akathistos cycle from Moldavia undoubtedly drew on the cultural heritage preserved in the countries of the Byzantine oikoumene, but it is very unlikely that the local painters would have drawn inspiration from a concrete model when depicting the scenes of the siege of Constantinople. As it is already known, the only earlier extant scene of the siege of Constantinople within the cycle of the Akathistos comes from Saint Peter’s Church on the island of Golem Grad on the lake of Prespa. Although it shows some common motifs with the Moldavian mural paintings, they rather formed a distinctive image type with traditional and new visual elements possibly recalling possibly also the other sieges of the Byzantine capital.³¹ Strangely enough, Constantinople had already been the centre of the Ottoman Empire for many years. It ceased to be the Tsargrad, “the city of the tsars”, for Orthodox Christians in the Balkans.³² Even the anonymous author of the Church Slavonic inscription at Moldovița admits this fact. He did not perceive the old defeat of the Scythian (or Avar) khagan as a timeless miracle of the Mother of God but rather as a one-time victory which annulled the downfall of the city after the Ottoman conquest in 1453.³³

The ideological message of these mural paintings certainly cannot be judged without considering the context of the period in which they originated. At that time, the Principality of Moldavia was under the shadow of the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Monarchy. After the death of Stephen III the Great of Moldavia, his illegitimate son Peter Rareș ascended the throne in 1527. It was during his reign when all Moldavian wall paintings with the scene of the siege of Constantinople were executed. Their establishment is usually associated with Rareș’s departure from pro-Ottoman politics, particularly from 1535, when the duke entered into an agreement with the Habsburg monarch Ferdinand I.³⁴

Therefore, it is quite possible that the traditional motif of the miraculous salvation of Constantinople from the Scythian (Avar) khagan contains in itself a broader ideological message: just as the Mother of God had saved Constantinople, she could accomplish a repeated miracle for those who believed in her miraculous power and fend off the power of the new enemies: the Ottoman Turks.³⁵ If these ideas were really formulated in this way, they suffered a serious blow in 1539, when the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman II invaded Moldavia. Under the pressure of the boyars, Rareș



Fig. 13.4 The Siege of Constantinople, 1541, exterior mural, south wall, Church of the Beheading of Saint John the Baptist, Arbore, Moldavia, modern-day Romania Artwork in the public domain; photograph by Alice Isabella Sullivan

had to leave the country and flee to Transylvania, where he fell into the hands of John Zápolya.³⁶ In 1541, Rareș once again assumed rule in Moldavia, but only at the sultan's will.³⁷ In the same year, painters finished the decoration of the Church of the Beheading of John the Baptist in the village of Arbore, which is the last church in Moldavia preserving the scene of the siege of Constantinople (Fig. 13.4).³⁸

In contrast to the previous wall paintings, there were no figures in Ottoman uniforms or any cannons. Was this an indication of the change in political reality? The siege had lost its current ideological message and once again become proof of a timeless miracle. As an accompanying Church Slavonic inscription states: "In 6035 [since the creation of the world] Tsar Chosro(i) with the Persians ... and the Scythians ... came against Constantinople with the army in the days of Tsar Iraklij. Thanks to the prayers, the Holy Mother of God became angry with them, and God sent thunder and rain and fire on them and sank all of them in the sea."³⁹

The using of the term "Scythians" with the mention of the Persian king Khusro (Chosro) and the addition that the attack took place in the era of Emperor Iraklij (Herakleios) undoubtedly refers to the siege of 626 as reflected in the Byzantine liturgical commemorations for the Feast of the Akathistos. Some words in the introductory part of the inscription are not entirely semantically clear and remain the subject of speculation.⁴⁰ The painting itself is not very visible, but despite the damage to it one can see fireballs raining from the sky on the places where the painting depicts sinking ships with their crews.

The last preserved example of with such scene preserved on Balkans contains the fresco dated to 1621/1622 located in the refectory of Hilandar Monastery on Athos. Its author, George Mitrofanović, schematically depicted the siege, the basis of which probably became the already mentioned fresco of Saint Peter's Church at Golem Grad island on Prespa Lake. In its centre, there is a procession with the icon of the Hodegetria, which is being carried on a pedestal by Byzantine dignitaries, the clergymen, and the people. The patriarch is dipping the Virgin's robe in front of the sunken enemy ships in the lower part of the image (Fig. 13.5).⁴¹

MUSCOVITE RUSSIA

Probably the oldest illustrations referring directly to the Avar siege of Constantinople in Muscovite Russia can be found in the monumental Illustrated Chronicle of Ivan the Terrible written in the 1560s–1570s.⁴² In the eighth part of its facsimile edition, five miniatures illustrate the attack of the Persians and the Avars labelled here as *Obri* (the Giants) and as the Scythians. One of the miniatures depicts the central scene of the defeat of the monoxyles in the Golden Horn. The written account of the Illustrated Chronicle is here based on the Slavonic translation of



Fig. 13.5 George Mitrofanović, The Siege of Constantinople, 1621–1622, interior mural, refectory, Hilandar Monastery, Mount Athos; artwork in the public domain; photograph by Dragan Vojvodić

the Chronicle of George Monachos and on the Russian Chronograph of 1512.⁴³

The first scenes of the siege of Constantinople within the Akathistos pictorial cycle begin to appear in Muscovy only from the end of the sixteenth century.⁴⁴ Probably the oldest one is painted on the wall of the Cathedral of the Intercession, now known as the Cathedral of the Trinity in Aleksandrova Sloboda, the well-known residence of the tsar Ivan the Terrible.⁴⁵ This fresco is usually dated around 1570, but this should be treated with caution since the wall paintings in this church have not yet been examined in detail (Fig. 13.6).⁴⁶

To 1570 is also dated the icon “The Annunciation with the Akathistos” (inv. no. 29558) which contains a traditional motif of the siege with the patriarch dipping the Virgin’s robe in the sea in front of the sunken ships



Fig. 13.6 The Siege of Constantinople, The Cathedral of the Intercession (the Cathedral of the Trinity), Aleksandrova Sloboda, Russia; photograph by Alexandr Preobrazhensky

in its last side image (kleima). Similarly, as in the case of Moldavian wall paintings, two fortified cities can be seen instead the one.⁴⁷ A very close mural painting to that can be found in the Cathedral of the Annunciation in Solvychevodsk belonging to a wealthy boyar family of Stroganov, dating back to 1600.⁴⁸ A different visualization of this scene contains the last kleima of the small icon “The Praise to the Mother of God with the Akathistos” (inv. no 12110, Tretyakov Gallery) dated to the end of the sixteenth century, which has the scene of sunken ships in front of the city with the image of the Theotokos.⁴⁹

Probably the most monumental wall painting with scene of the siege of Constantinople in Muscovite Russia is preserved in the Smolensk Cathedral of the Novodevichiy Monastery at Moscow (Fig. 13.7).

As part of the Akathistos cycle, it is located on the southern wall of this church as its concluding scene, similarly as in the case of the Moldavian churches.⁵⁰ Dated to 1598, it is typologically related to the fresco of Church of Saint Peter at Prespa, albeit with some partial differences.⁵¹ There is a city with a church (probably the Theotokos of Blachernai) in the centre. A procession advancing in front of it can be seen with the icon of the Hodegetria, the image of Christ (acheiropoietos), and with a large ceremonial Cross probably containing the fragment of the True Cross. The enemy army advances from the left, while on the right there is a rough sea with sunken ships. The patriarch is dipping the Virgin’s robe in front of the city and not, as in the case of the Church of St. Peter (Golem Grad, Prespa), from its walls. Again, the motifs of the two sieges of Constantinople (626 and 860) are combined.⁵²

More illustrations of the siege of Constantinople started to appear on frescoes and icons since the second half of the seventeenth century. Their emergence was closely related to the increasing popularity of the Feast of Akathistos and its pictorial cycles after the Times of Trouble which ended in 1613 with the election of Michail I as the first tsar from the Romanov dynasty.⁵³ The most famous fresco of that era is preserved in the Church of the Deposition of the Robe of the Kremlin dated to 1644 (Fig. 13.8).⁵⁴

The dignitaries of besieged city hold the icon of the Eleousa type in their hands while the patriarch is soaking the Robe of Virgin accompanied by one young cleric (probably deacon).⁵⁵ An advancing army on the right side is beating the enemy with their swords. On the upper right side of the fresco, the introductory words of the second prologue (1 kontakion) of the Akathistos are inscribed in Church Slavonic.



Fig. 13.7 The Siege of Constantinople, 1598. Smolensk Cathedral of the Novodevichiy Monastery at Moscow, Russia; photograph by Alexandr Preobrazhensky

The other Russian wall paintings with the scene of the siege of Constantinople come from the Cathedral of the Dormition of Kirillo-Belozersk monastery (1641)⁵⁶ and the Cathedral of the Dormition in the Kremlin (1642/1643).⁵⁷ The last one (known to me) is preserved in the Cathedral of the Dormition of the Princess's Monastery in Vladimir from 1647–1648.⁵⁸

Most of the Russian icons dated to the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries preserve the siege of Constantinople as a first side miniature (kleima) illustrating the second prologue of the Akathistos. In some cases, it



Fig. 13.8 The Siege of Constantinople, 1644, the Church of the Deposition of the Robe, Kremlin, Moscow, Russia; photograph by Alexandr Preobrazhensky

appeared as a concluding scene of the Akathistos reflecting the praise of the Theotokos. These side miniatures appeared on two types of icons: “The Praise to the Mother of God with the Akathistos” and “The Annunciation with the Akathistos”. To the oldest ones belongs “The

Annunciation with the Akathistos” from the Cathedral of Annunciation (Kremlin, Moscow), dated to the first half of the seventeenth century.⁵⁹ Probably the best-known such miniature is depicted on “The Annunciation with the Akathistos”, a richly decorated icon from the Church of the Holy Trinity (Nikitinki, Moscow) painted by Simon Ushakov and his circle dating back to 1659.⁶⁰ Similar scenes can be seen on other icons from the mid-seventeenth century, such as “The Mother of God Theodorovskaya with the Akathistos”,⁶¹ “Praise to the Mother of God with the Akathistos” from the collection of the Yaroslavl Art Museum (I-24, KP-53403/22),⁶² and “The Praise to the Mother of God with the Akathistos” from the Pochvalsky Church of Poteshny Palace at the Kremlin.⁶³ Around 1675 was painted the icon “The Praise of Mother of God with the Akathistos” belonging to the Kremlin Armoury.⁶⁴ Another example of this scene can be seen in a Russian triptych icon from the seventeenth century, whose central part has been lost.⁶⁵ From the 1680s comes the icon “The Mother of God with the Child on the Throne” (known also as “The Mother of God of Cyprus”), which depicts a different type of the siege in its eleventh kleima. There is a large icon of Hodegetria-type exposed in the church (probably that of Blachernai) with kneeling people from each side. The ships of the enemy are concentrated under the walls of the city on the bottom part of the image, but they are not destroyed.⁶⁶

From the eighteenth century comes the icon “The Praise to the Mother of God with the Akathistos” by Ivan Abrosimov (the State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, inv. no. DRZH-3127),⁶⁷ and “The Mother of God Kazanskaya with the Akathistos” (State Museum of Palekh Art; Museum of Icons; inv. no. 11/4).⁶⁸ The latest siege scene from the Russian collections is depicted on an icon called “The Leaping of the Babe with the Akathistos”, dated to the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁶⁹ This overview of the Russian icons containing the scene of the siege of Constantinople within the pictorial cycle of the Akathistos is certainly not definite.

Among the Greek collections of the post-Byzantine icons, there is only one depiction of the siege of Constantinople known to me. Dated to the eighteenth century, it shows certain parallels with the already mentioned scene from the Russian icon “The Mother of God with the Child on the Throne/The Mother of God of Cyprus”. There is also a large icon of Hodegetria, but this time carried in the procession with the participation of the patriarch.⁷⁰ The army and the ships of the enemy were seen in the bottom part of the image. The enemies are depicted in the Ottoman fash-

ion of the eighteenth century, and there are black people among them as well. Also, the ships correspond to Ottoman military galleys from the same period.

THE CYCLE OF ARCHANGEL MICHAEL

In addition to the presented iconographic evidence, two other iconographic types of the siege of Constantinople are known. Both are part of the other iconographical cycle, that of The Miracles of Archangel Michael. The first type is related to the Arab siege of Constantinople, traditionally dated to 674–678.⁷¹ The scene of sinking ships in all such depictions is undoubtedly based on Byzantine and post-Byzantine written sources commemorating the deliverance of Constantinople from the Saracens (Arabs) by Archangel Michael.⁷² However, this miraculous story is not the only one related to the siege of Constantinople. Another one clearly refers to the Avars (Scythians) and Persians, whose power was also destroyed through the miraculous intervention of this saint.⁷³ Among such written collections, the first can be dated to the last quarter of the ninth or beginning of the tenth centuries, and its authorship is attributed to Pantaleon, the deacon, and chartophylax of the Hagia Sophia in Constantinople.⁷⁴ A similar story was found by the Greek preacher and metropolitan Damaskenos Stoudites (c. 1500–after 1575) and later in the Synaxarion of the Orthodox Church.⁷⁵ In addition, there is another important testimony from the post-Byzantine period: the *Hermeneia* of the Greek painter and monk Dionysios of Fourni (c. 1670–c. 1745). The only iconographical instruction of the siege of Constantinople mentioned by him is exactly connected with the cycle of The Miracles of Archangel Michael. Dionysios, however, does not mention the Arab siege of Constantinople; on the contrary, he stated how painters should proceed when depicting the miraculous rescue of Constantinople from the attack of the Persians. This could refer only to 626, for there are no reports of the other Persian attacks on the Byzantine capital. According to these instructions, the painters were to depict a large and splendid city being besieged by a huge crowd of soldiers with ladders against the walls. The figure of Archangel Michael with “the clouds holding a fiery sword and with great light surrounding him” is supposed to stand in the centre of this scene.⁷⁶

At least five examples of the miraculous intervention of Archangel Michael are nowadays considered to be reflections of the siege of Constantinople by the Avars and Persians.⁷⁷ The oldest one is dated to the

mid-sixteenth century and was originally a part of the north wall of the destroyed Church of the Miracle at Chonai at the Kremlin in Moscow.⁷⁸ The (now lost) fresco, nowadays identified with the Avar siege of Constantinople, should have depicted the enemy having been destroyed by Archangel Michael.⁷⁹ Previous authors identified this with the famous Miracle of Archangel Michael beating the 185,000 Assyrians of King Sennacherib at Jerusalem (II Kings 19.35 and Isa. 37.36).⁸⁰ Unlike the depiction of the Avar and Persian siege of Constantinople, this scene is well attested to in the iconography of the Archangel Michael cycle in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine eras. Since there is no trace for the appropriate inscription of this lost fresco, the attribution to any concrete siege is therefore highly speculative.

The next postulated iconographical example of the siege of 626 can be seen in the already mentioned Smolensk Cathedral of the Novodevichiy Monastery in Moscow.⁸¹ This fresco is situated on the southern wall and belongs to the cycle of Archangel Michael. The winged Archangel with the sword in his right hand pursues the fleeing soldiers on horseback. According to S. Gabelić and S. Koukiars, this scene should be identified with the destruction of the Avars, but the preserved Slavonic inscription clearly refers to the smiting of the Ishmaelites.⁸² Other motifs related to the miraculous salvation of Constantinople from the Avars and Persians are absent in this scene. There is no image of a city which could be possibly identified with Constantinople, neither is there the church where, according to the written story preserved in various collections of Miracles of Archangel Michael, the miracle was to have occurred.

The next possible representation of the Avar siege contains the icon of the Athonite Monastery of Iberon dated to 1680. Unlike the previous two illustrations, this one clearly refers to the miraculous intervention of the Archistrategos Michael in Constantinople against the Persians by means of a preserved Greek inscription. The city (Constantinople) is situated on the left side of the image. Michael is standing in front of its walls with a raised sword in his right hand and pursuing the enemy (the Persians).⁸³ The other example of such a scene is situated in the Chapel of the Holy Archangels of the Philotheou Monastery at Athos (1746). According to the Greek inscription preserved on the top of this fresco, the memory of the miraculous deliverance of Constantinople from the Persians was commemorated.⁸⁴ Under the inscription, a winged angel is depicted raising a sword in his right hand and attacking the infantry and cavalry of the Persians, who are holding spears. The dead bodies of the enemy are visible

in the centre of the painting. On the right is Constantinople with its white walls and buildings where cannons are firing upon the enemy.

The last two examples come from Bulgaria. The first one is the side image (kleima) of an icon belonging to the National Collection of Sofia featuring Archangel Michael, who is trying to expel the enemy from the walls of the city.⁸⁵ The second one can be seen on the northern wall of the western arch of the Church of the Archangel Michael in the village of Rila, and it is dated to the end of the eighteenth century.⁸⁶ The winged archangel is shown on the right side of the fresco in front of the walls of the city. He is probably trying to cast away the scaling ladder of the enemy. In the lower left corner, some cavalry is attacking the city while on the other side there is a contemporary ship with unfurled sails.

Wall paintings with the scene of the miraculous salvation of Constantinople by Archangel Michael from the attacking Persians are only known from post-Byzantine art. Despite the previous categorization, it seems that some of them did not display this scene at all. This iconographical archetype occurs very rarely as part of the cycle of Archangel Michael, being closely associated to another famous scene illustrating the defeat of the Assyrians of King Sennacherib at Jerusalem. A direct textual link between this miracle and the defeat of the Avars and Persians can be found in the oldest hagiographic collection on Archangel Michael written by the deacon Pantaleon.⁸⁷ In at least two cases, the mural paintings of both miracles are located close to each other, such as in the chapel of the Athonite Monastery of Philotheou and on the Bulgarian icon of the National Collection of Sofia.⁸⁸ In later written testimonies of the miracles of Archangel Michael, only the Persians are mentioned as the attackers of Constantinople. This change is confirmed by wall paintings featuring this scene in the accompanying inscription.

NOTES

1. Cf. the chapter “The Akathistos”.
2. George of Pisidia *Poem* 95 and 96, 496–498; cf. also Speck 1980, 54–57.
3. For this feast, cf. chapter “The Akathistos”. Ševčenko (1991a, 56) ascribes the popularity of the Akathistos to its regular singing in the Byzantine monasteries, not only during the homonymous Feast but on every Friday as well.
4. For a general overview: Myslivec 1932, 97–130; Pätzold 1989 and Spatharakis 2005.

5. Velmans 1972, Fig. 2, 154 (Escorial); Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 663–665; Spatharakis 2005, 75; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1991, 448–449.
6. Salikova 1981, 133–135 and Gromova 2005 (cf. especially 107–114). On the icon of the Hodegetria, cf. Belting 1990, 87–91; Angelidi and Papamastorakis 2000, 373–397; Baltoyanni 2000, 144–147, Pentcheva 2006, 109–143. Cf. Garidis 1977–1984, 104.
7. Grozdanov 2014, 10 (also Fig. 2, 14).
8. Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 669, 698. In contrary, Knežević (1966, 254) concluded that the battle scene of the siege of Constantinople occurred here for the first time as a special reflection of the historical and legendary background of the Akathistos hymn. Cf. also Velmans 1972, 138; Garidis 1977–1984, 105;
9. Grozdanov 1979, 278; Garidis 1977–1984, 106; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 655, 669.
10. Symeon Magister and Logothetes, 131.29, 245–247.
11. Photios, 4.45.23–31; cf. also Vasiliev 1946, 219–223; Mango 1958, 102. Wortley 1977, 111–126 and 2005, 171–187.
12. Vasiliev 1946, 101–102; Mango 1958, 76–77; Cutler 1975, 138–139; Belting Ihm 1976, 43–44; Kazhdan and Talbot 1991/1992, 403; Weyl Carr 2001, 63–65; Wortley 2005, 185; Pentcheva 2006, 53. Cf. also Ševčenko and Kazhdan 1991, 1294 (maphorion).
13. For this term Ševčenko 1991b, 1526. Cf. Symeon Magister and Logothetes, 131.29, 245–247. Also, Theophanes Continuatus (lib. 1–6, 6.15, 407.2–3) and the dependent John Skylitzes (2.12, 219.32–33) refer to this relic as an omophorion instead of a maphorion (in this connection, cf. the other variant of the chronicle of Symeon Magister and Logothetes labelled as Leon Grammatikos, 241.8). Only the Ps.-Symeon Magister (674.23) has a maphorion. The Church Slavonic version of the Chronicle of George Monachos (511.16) mentions the robe/garment (*riza*, gr. *esthes*) of the Theotokos which was supposedly taken from the Blachernai church by Photios and Emperor Michael. Similarly, cf. *The Nikon Chronicle*, 7. The next testimony follows Anna Komnene and the story of her father Alexios fighting the Pechenegs by Dristra in 1087. Like previous Byzantine chroniclers, Anna Komnene (7.3.9, 212.82–83) also speaks of an omophorion which Alexios had supposedly lost during the fierce fighting. Only the patriarch of Antioch John Oxites (39.22–23), by recalling the story of the attack of the Rhos in 860, clearly calls this relic a maphorion (το ἅγιον της Θεομήτορος ῥάκος—μαφόριον σύνηθεσ τοῦτο καλεῖν).
14. This attack was not even included in the Synaxarion of the Hagia Sophia despite occasional claims: Grégoire and Orgels 1954, 141–145; however, cf. Speck 1980, 108–109, n. 194.
15. Theodore Laskaris, 273.30–33; cf. also 274.52–53.

16. *Synopsis chronike*, 108.19; Theodore Skoutariotes, 2199, 122.8.
17. Konstantin Manasi, 133. n. 18.
18. Alexander the Clerk, 163.
19. Stephen of Novgorod, 38 (the English translation on 39).
20. Alexander the Clerk, 163 (the English translation on 162).
21. On these wall paintings, cf. Tafrali 1924, 456–461; Grecu 1924, 273–289; Ulea 1963, 29–71; Meinardus 1972, 169–183; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 660, 667–669 and 1991, 455–456. Most recently, Costea 2011, 136–140 and Sullivan 2017, 31–68. For a useful overview of previous research: Ciobanu 2005, 17–32.
22. Cf. Among others: Grecu 1924, 279–280; Meinardus 1972, 170–171; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 669, and Sullivan 2017, 37.
23. Grecu 1924, 273–279, Meinardus 1972, 172–173.
24. Grecu 1924, 275.
25. Grecu 1924, 289; Meinardus 1972, 172–173; Sullivan 2017, 35, 37. Recently, Iosipescu (2016, 201) has concluded that the frescoes still reflect an imaginary siege by the Turks.
26. Grabar 1947, 93.
27. Tafrali 1924, 459; Grabar 1947, 90.
28. Cf. Meinardus 1972, 181–183.
29. Cf. Ciobanu 2005, 38–42.
30. For these texts, cf. the chapter “The Memory of the Siege”.
31. According to C. Ciobanu (2005, 22, 94), the painters of the Moldavian mural paintings could also be influenced by other stories, including that of Nestor Iskander describing the siege and fall of Constantinople in 1453, who concluded his account with a prediction of the repeated occupation of Constantinople by the Christians. Unfounded is, however, the conclusion of E. Piltz (2001, 271 and 278), according to which the scenes with the siege of Constantinople at Humor and Sucevița should only depict the scene of Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453.
32. Ciobanu, 2014, 26–27; cf. also Sullivan 2017, 40–49.
33. Grabar 1946, 101.
34. Recently Sullivan 2017, 55–59.
35. Ulea 1963, 47 and Sullivan 2017, 54–55 and n. 110 (with further literature).
36. Gemil 2009, 56–60 and 252–259.
37. Sugar 1996, 118–122; Gemil 2009, 301.
38. The scenes on the other church at Voroneț decorated at the same time are now lost. Meinardus 1972, 173–174; Sullivan 2017, 40.
39. First published by Grecu 1924, 288.
40. Ciobanu 2014, 21–23.
41. Millet 1927 (Fig. on 104); Garidis 1977–1984, 112.

42. On that source, cf. Morozov 2005.
43. Cf. *Litsevoy Letopisniy Svod*, 308–312. Cf. Georgij Mnich, 434.24–30 and *The Chronograph of 1512*, 304.
44. Salikova 1998, 57; Grozdanov 1980, 130–131.
45. On that church, cf.
46. On the dating of this cathedral, cf. esp. Zagraevskiy 2005, 69–92 and 2014. I owe a debt of gratitude to, A. Preobrazhensky who provided me with valuable comments and photographic documentation of this fresco.
47. *Ikony stroganovskikh votchin*, 2003, 25 (Fig. on 94).
48. Preobrazhensky 2017, 178–179 (Fig. on 188).
49. Salikova 1998, 61 and 63 (Fig. 5).
50. Retkovskaya 1954, 16–31; Salikova 1998, 59–61; Kvlividze 2003, 223–224. Kvlividze (2003, 227) connect this scene with the emerging cult of the Deposition of the Virgin's Robe in Muscovy, and he dates its creation in the time after the signing of a peace treaty between Tsar Boris Godunov and Tatar Khan Kazy Kirej on 29 June 1598.
51. Meinardus 1972, 116–119; Salikova 1998, 59–61; Kvlividze 2003, 223–225.
52. Kvlividze 2003, 225, 227.
53. Salikova 1998, 56–57; Kvlividze 2003, 81–85.
54. Salikova 1980, 138.
55. Meinardus 1972, 115–116, Salikova 1980, 141.
56. Kazakevich 2006, 95–96.
57. Salikova 1998, 64.
58. Sara'byanov –Smirnova, 671, image n. 628.
59. Salikova 1999, 264–266; fig. 1, 264 and in detail fig. 2 on 267.
60. Scheffer 1946, 6, 8–10; Garidis 1977–1984, 112; Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 666; Salikova 1998, 64.
61. Kazakevich 1980, 13; Bryusova 1985, 44, 46–48, 50 (Fig. 23–26).
62. *Yaroslavskiy khudozhestvennyy muzey* 2007, 132 (fig. on 37).
63. Salikova 1998, 64.
64. Bryusova 1985, 86–87, fig. 52.
65. Lafontaine-Dosogne 1984, 663 (XII, Fig. 28).
66. Bryusova 1984 (fig. n. 79); *Sophiya Premudrost' Bozhya* 2000, 160–161 (fig. on 161).
67. *Prechistomu obrazu Tvoemu poklonyaemsya* 1995, 130.
68. *Ikonopis Palekha* 1994, 52–53, 137, 147, (fig. XLIV).
69. *Ural'skaya ikona*, 161 (fig. on 46).
70. Lafontaine-Dosogne 1991, 454 (fig. 7).
71. There is only one such scene from the Byzantine period. It is preserved in the Lesnovo Monastery (Republic of Macedonia) and dated to 1347/1348. cf. Gabelič 1991, 112–113; 1998, 96–97 and 2004, 94–95 (Fig 103);

- Karapli 2009, 332; cf. also Garidis 1977–1984, 107. For the other post-Byzantine types, cf. Gabelić 2004, 228–231, 236–237 (Fig. 226b), 241–242 (Fig. 231) 264–266 and Koukiars 2006, 34, 219 (Fig. 3); 58–59, 229 (Fig. 18); 58, 270 (Fig 101); 62, 189–190, 273 (Fig. 109); 76, 188; 70, 238 (Fig. 34); 79, 188; 90, 262 (Fig. 85).
72. Karapli 2009, 331–332.
 73. Koukiars 2006, 155–157.
 74. Mango 1978, 118. The still unedited text of the Pantaleon is preserved in numerous Greek manuscripts listed by Grusková (2010, 74, n. 71). The oldest exemplar of this story is preserved in the Parisinus Graecus 1510, fol. 94v–95r from the tenth century (Tsiaples 2015, 90).
 75. Damaskinos Stoudites, 266; *Megas Synaxaristes*, 187–188.
 76. Dionysios of Fourná, 174.
 77. Koukiars 2006, 155–157.
 78. Gabelić 2004, 209–211 (Fig. 211); Koukiars 2006, 57 and 156.
 79. Martynov and Snegarev 1852, 94; Malkov 1977, 378.
 80. Malkov 1977, 378.
 81. Gabelić 2004, 207; Koukiars 2006, 55, 156.
 82. Gabelić 2004, 207; Koukiars 2006, 54–55.
 83. Koukiars 2006, 71, 155.
 84. Koukiars 2006, 89 (Fig. 69, 254).
 85. Koukiars 2006, 73–75.
 86. Koukiars 2006, 98.
 87. *Miracula Michaelis Archangeli*, 90; cf. also Antonios Tripsychos *Logos*, 4, 81.8–13.
 88. Koukiars 2006, 75; 89–90.

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The Spiritual Arsenal of the Siege

The power of rituals is always multiplied by their grandiosity and mystical symbolism. When on Tuesday, July 29, a massive Avar army gathered before Constantinople, it put on an exhibition of monumental theatrics for the astounded inhabitants. Closed ranks of warriors marched in front of the whole perimeter of the Theodosian Walls.¹ The Avar khagan was the first of many war leaders who tried to take their target by not firing a single shot on the fortifications of Byzantine capital. His spectacular tactic was later faithfully repeated by the Bulgarian khan Krum who besieged Constantinople in July 813.² The dejection which the Avar forces left on the city's defenders was answered by the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios. On the same day, he organized a large procession along the city's walls as an expression of the collective will of the inhabitants to defend their city, even in the absence of Emperor Herakleios.³ The patriarch and his flock could not have known that their actions would become a model for future generations and means for believers to call on spiritual protection in times of fading hope and desperation.

THE PROCESSION OF SERGIOS

The last quarter of the fourth century marked the beginning of the stationary ecclesiastical processions in Constantinople.⁴ From the fifth century onwards, the reports of the supplicatory processions also appeared in the

sources. At first, these occurred spontaneously to spiritually confront the immediate threat, usually in the form of an earthquake or plague.⁵ The most traumatic ones were later commemorated in the Byzantine liturgy on regular basis.⁶ In Constantinople, and the whole empire, such calamities were seen as expressions of God's anger which could be quelled only by impassioned pleas from people gathered in a procession.

The religious procession organized by the patriarch Sergios was probably also a spontaneous kind of reaction in the case of need. It was a response to the military attack of the enemy. However, was that procession the first one of this type in the history of Constantinople? Before the Avar attack, many enemies had come to its terrestrial walls.⁷ It could be supposed that there were some processions in the capital beseeching God to turn the enemy away prior to the Avar siege. The sources, however, reveal nothing of this. The only exception was the Avar incursion on the outskirts of the Constantinople in 623. The inhabitants commemorated this event every year as the first military threat to the city.⁸ At that time, various spontaneous litanies took place in Constantinople.⁹ However, preserved sources did not suggest that the patriarch Sergios organized a procession along the city walls on that occasion.

Three years later, there was an entirely different situation. Not content to merely ravage the outskirts, the Avars had come to occupy and pillage the capital. The patriarch probably did not plan his procession in advance. Possibly, it was a rapid reaction to the visual manifestation of the Avars' strength. Sergios could understand the powerful impact this had on his faithful. He also had to take heed of the fact that the Avars knew about the absence of Emperor Herakleios from the city. In a situation where the defenders were without their supreme leader and appeared relatively unprotected, Sergios clearly demonstrated to them that they would not be left to the mercy of fate. This message had to be clearly understandable to all the people who lacked their terrestrial leader in war—Emperor Herakleios. Such absence was, however, not compensated for by his image, but by the image of his eternal archetype—the Jesus Christ carried by Sergios during the procession.

In their comprehensiveness, the actions of the patriarch established a new element which his flock had not experienced before. Even though neither Sergios nor anyone else with him was aware of the fact, the form and method which they chose to respond to the Avar threat derived from ritual patterns of the late antique world. In Constantinople, the renewal of

the Graeco-Roman tradition of the city as a specifically defined cultural unit was reborn.¹⁰

The walking through a precisely defined space was already a special feature of some supplicatory processions in Ancient Greece and Rome.¹¹ The people created a magical circle that formed a boundary and delimited a protected sacred space. If someone tried to desecrate it, he paid with his life, just like in the mythical beginnings of Rome in the time of Romulus and Remus.¹²

The procession of the patriarch Sergios is mentioned in two key sources of the Avar siege. Their authors—Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia—recognized the unusual act by the patriarch and the call on heavenly powers. While they both gave the procession a lot of attention in their works, they did not focus on its course so much as on its symbolism, which each of them understood in a different way. Synkellos saw the Avar siege as a visualization and fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies in Constantinople. He referred to the capital as the New and better Jerusalem and at the same time he acclaimed the patriarch Sergios as the new Moses because like him he had saved his people from the enemy.¹³

George of Pisidia saw the procession rather as an act of mystical law, which he presented as an allegory of a court trial with the Avars. Its main actor was the patriarch Sergios and the image of Jesus Christ which he showed to the Avars gathered before the walls of Constantinople. Sergios uses the term “*graphie*” to describe this image, which in Greek can mean both “image” and “writing”. In the language of the court poetry, the Christ the Word occurred here not only as the Greatest Judge but also at the same time as the written (legal) indictment brought against the barbarians.¹⁴

AN IMPRINT OF THE DIVINE ORIGINAL

A liturgical procession with a protective spiritual arsenal against the enemy appeared in the history of Constantinople for the first time during the Avar siege. However, similar practices in the eastern parts of the empire were present as early as at the beginning of the sixth century. During the Persian attack on the Syrian city of Constantina in 503, the local bishop urged the inhabitants into action by sprinkling water on the city walls in the company of soldiers.¹⁵ A procession that took place during a siege was specifically mentioned in 540 in the time of the Persian attack on Apamea.¹⁶

The local bishop, Thomas, showed the frightened defenders a fragment of the True Cross before the siege began. During the religious procession with this relic, a miraculous fire appeared which was seen by the author of the report, the church historian Evagrius, who was still a boy at the time and was visiting the shrine with his parents. Like his predecessor Prokopios, he believed that this relic saved Apamea. The Persian king, Khusro I, allowed its bishop to keep the fragment of the True Cross and agreed to a generous ransom for his retreat.¹⁷

However, images did not play any role in these early cases. The Christians of this period still had in living memory their use and veneration in the pre-Christian era. Many of them looked at these objects as dead matter; however, pagans considered some of them as the sacred objects of heavenly origin. Some of the most well-known artefacts included the Palladion of Troy, which was an engraved wooden image of the goddess Athena. It was commonly believed that a city possessing this artefact could not be defeated.¹⁸ Several different representations and descriptions of this palladion have been preserved; however, a consistent feature, also used later in Christian imagery, was belief in supernatural origin of such an object.¹⁹

During the pre-Christian era, such significant artefacts included the image of Artemis in Ephesus and the image of the Graeco-Egyptian god Serapis in Alexandria. Belief in the supernatural powers of such cult objects was also adopted by the Romans.²⁰ The ceremonial use of these objects in a procession was a sort of archetype of the later Christian translation of the relics of saints and icons. The Romans ascribed heavenly origin to such artefacts and sometimes used them in processions intended to quell the anger of the gods; one example was the sacred shield of Mars, which was thought to have come from heaven.²¹ During antiquity, images resided in their homes (temples) and became objects of a cult accompanied by a belief in the presence of a particular god within the image. Many of them, such as Athena, protected cities, even though general opinion stated that the goddess did not take part in battles herself and sent heroes to fight on her behalf. The power of Athena, like in the case of the Virgin Mary, came from her image.²²

Many of the ideas concerning images were later appropriated by the Christians. Despite initial resistance, they remained loyal in many ways to the traditional patterns of the ancient world, bringing to them new content meant to meet their own needs. Up to the second half of the sixth

century, only the image of the emperor was considered as a sacred cult object in the Christian world.²³

However, in the last third of the sixth century, there appeared the images of Christ which were believed to have not been made by human hands. In the Judeo-Christian world, the word “acheiropoiotos” initially referred to everything which was not made by human hands, including people formed in the image of God.²⁴ Why did such images suddenly come into being? Was it an answer to a political and military crisis in the Roman Empire? Probably yes, because the inhabitants began to perceive these images as some sort of spiritual substitute for the governing elites in times of need.²⁵ Some of them appeared during the military confrontations between the Eastern Roman Empire and Persia as new symbols of integration in times of general uncertainty. It was, however, the supernatural method of manufacture which made these unique cult objects. In contrast to ordinary images, acheiropoietai were characteristically closer to the venerated relics of saints: they showed the historical existence of Christ and his vivid human nature as well.²⁶

Is it a mere coincidence that acheiropoietai appeared first in Syria and Asia Minor, both places where images of heavenly origin were worshipped in pre-Christian times?²⁷ What made these objects heavenly artefacts? Was it enough to have a simple legend and cult worship for this purpose? This was barely possible at the end of antiquity, because suspicions of idolatry still remained. An image had to be created in a certain way, in a way totally unlike the techniques of common artists, to achieve a heavenly status. Essentially, they were imprints of Christ’s body, according to the contemporary sources.²⁸ Yet the only one among them is reported to have miraculously saved the people from the attack of an enemy. This is the famous Image of Edessa, later called the Mandyllion, which, according to church historian Evagrius, helped to turn back the Persian attack on Edessa in 544.²⁹ His account is seen by some as an authentic supplement to the original report by Prokopios, which Evagrius drew on.³⁰ Others, however, maintain that this is in fact a later interpretation, or even an interpolation, which appeared in Evagrius’s text only during iconoclastic disputes.³¹

However, according to Evagrius, the image did not only defend the Edessians but also directly intervened in the middle of the siege; thus, it did not just have a protective role.³² This conception was entirely unique in that era, and there is only one exception of this kind known to me. When the Christian pilgrim Egeria visited Edessa in the fourth century,

the bishop showed her preserved correspondence between Christ and King Abgar which led to the beginning of legends about the Image of Edessa; he also added a narration about the miraculous salvation of the city from the Persians. Apparently, Edessa was saved by Abgar's letter, which the king had taken to the city gate and read aloud. Like the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios many years later, Abgar allegedly lifted his protective object, this time the letter of Christ with both hands, and presented it to all people as a sacred object. However, this is where the similarities with the Avar siege end. Whereas Sergios merely appealed for protection from the Avars, it is said that after Abgar read the letter aloud a great darkness appeared over the Persians and complicated their efforts. Moreover, the Bishop of Edessa said to Egeria that "every time the enemy wanted to attack and conquer the city, the letter was brought out and all of the enemy was driven back on command."³³ Abgar's procession with the letter is simply a legend; however, the practices which the bishop described to Egeria could certainly have been commonplace in the fourth century.³⁴

Images made without hands were not automatically seen as protectors of cities. Leaving aside the disputable report by Evagrius, there is no proof of their use before the Avar siege of 626. George of Pisidia and Theodore the Synkellos, both eyewitnesses to the attack, agree that the image carried by Sergios in the procession was that of Jesus Christ, the Judge and Saviour. Theodore Synkellos said that this image had not been "made by human hands", whereas George of Pisidia refers to "an awesome form of painting which cannot be painted".³⁵ A description of the image itself was unfortunately not provided. Regardless, this must have been an example of an *acheiropoietos*³⁶ and not the icon in the proper sense of meaning.³⁷ How did it occur in Constantinople? If it was used by Sergios, it had to have been connected to a miraculous report which would have allowed him to use it as a respected cult object for protection. In the military context at that time, there was only one well-known *acheiropoietos*: the celebrated *Kamouliana*. Probably one of its copies ended up in Constantinople under the reign of Emperor Justin II along with a fragment of the True Cross.³⁸

Another *acheiropoietos* was used by Roman commanders of Emperor Maurikios (Philippikos and Priskos) to encourage their troops during the Roman-Sasanian War.³⁹ However, the author of that report—Theophylaktos Simokattes—did not call it by name. He only stated that it was an image not made with the hands of a weaver or painter.⁴⁰ If this report is

authentic and not a retrospective projection,⁴¹ then this is the first evidence of the use of an *acheiropoietos* of Christ in a military context.⁴² Until that time, armies had only used busts of emperors on standards in the shape of a cross (*labarum*) or other military symbols.⁴³

This practice became more common in the Eastern Roman Empire following the succession of Emperor Herakleios to the throne. At the time of his arrival in Constantinople in 610, his flagship was decorated with an image of the Mother of God to show to the enemy.⁴⁴ Before his expedition against the Persians in 622, Herakleios took “a sacred and worshipped semblance of an unpainted image”, but George of Pisidia, similarly to Simokattes, did not give that image a concrete name.⁴⁵

The Roman military commanders, Emperor Herakleios, and even the patriarch Sergios therefore clearly relied on the miraculous power of images not made by human hands. These images could have had different origins and fates. Nonetheless, it was characteristic for them that they were not mentioned by name. Their identification with the *Kamoulia* is simply a modern concept. The one thing that can be said with certainty is that they were images which were believed to have not been made by human hands, and that the presence and effect of supernatural powers were always closely associated with these objects.⁴⁶ In addition, the invocation of God’s name served to bring about a transcendental energy. During the Avar siege, the patriarch, who was a spiritual soldier, therefore did not show the enemy a portrait of the emperor but one of Christ as the highest heavenly protector. Another such image was taken by Herakleios himself before he started the Persian campaign in 622. In front of his troops, he emphasized the divine role of God in a military context: “He is the emperor and lord of all and the commander of our armies.”⁴⁷

THE MIRACULOUS FUNCTION OF IMAGES

Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia attribute a psychological and protective function to the *acheiropoietos* of Christ.⁴⁸ However, during the Avar siege, other objects also fulfilled this role. In Synkellos’s report, it is stated that before the arrival of the Avars to the city the patriarch had images of the Mother of God displayed on the gates of the Theodosian Walls. The procession with the *acheiropoietos* against the enemy was most likely the first of its kind in the history of Christianity. On the other hand, the hanging of protective objects on the city gates was not an exceptional step. It is not clear what sort of images was involved. Theodore Synkellos

mentions an image of the Mother of God holding Christ, which iconographically would correspond to a Hodegetria-type image (literally “The one who leads the way”). In later periods, the inhabitants of Constantinople attributed to the concrete icon of this type a decisive role in defending the city against the Avars and later enemies. However, in this case Theodore Synkellos was clearly talking about a multitude of images of the Virgin Mary, which he saw as clear symbols of protection.⁴⁹

This sort of use of the images presumably had a long tradition. In pre-Christian times, these apotropaic images could repel evil forces and protect a specified sacred area. In Ancient Greece, the apotropaic function was attributed to Apollo, and in Athens his images were hung over the entries to dwellings. Images of the goddess Athena were found on boats and served as a form of protection against the many dangers of the sea.⁵⁰

In Christianity, images fulfilled this function from the fifth century at the latest, and in the following century, they became protective symbols of entire cities.⁵¹ They acted in times of uncertainty and crisis, and they gave strength to secular authorities. According to a preserved inscription from the Syrian city of Chalcis, the city gates were decorated with images of Jesus Christ, the emperor, and the highest secular and religious officials; the text specifically states that they served to protect the city from barbarians.⁵²

During the Avar siege, such a protective arsenal was not seen as an initiator of victory. Contemporary authors emphasize miraculous power through image not made by human hands but do not attribute any specific miracle to it. The destruction of the Slavic canoes in the Golden Horn is attributed by George of Pisidia and Theodore Synkellos solely to Mary, the symbolic gate of incarnation. However, in later descriptions of the Avar siege, there are some differences in understanding Sergios’s procession. The first example of this shift is in a later report on the Avar siege, the *Historia Syntomos* (BHG 1062), whose anonymous author clearly drew on Synkellos’s homily or its epitomes. However, he did not mention the hanging of the Marian images of Mary on the city walls and transformed this motif into a procession of the patriarch Sergios with one icon of the Theotokos.⁵³ Almost the same motif was present in one of the variants of the famous Synaxarion of Constantinople (Lipsiensis R II 25), preserved in the monastery S. Giorgio di Tucco in Calabria and dated to 1172. The anonymous compiler of this text, however, mentioned a procession with several “pure and holy icons of the all-Holy Theotokos”.⁵⁴

In the historical prologue to the Feast of the Akathistos, the *Diegesis Ophelimos*, there are two processions instead of one. In the first one, the patriarch Sergios used an unnamed image of the Theotokos, just like in the *Historia Syntomos*.⁵⁵ In the second procession, the author of the *Diegesis* magnified the magical power of the acheiropoietos of Christ by means of other sacred artefacts (i.e., the Virgin's garment and a fragment of the True Cross). A similar phenomenon can be seen in another historical prologue to the Feast of the Akathistos (*Lectio Triodii*) and by the late Byzantine author Antonios of Larissa.⁵⁶

OTHER SACRED OBJECTS OF THE SIEGE

In portraying the procession, eyewitnesses to the Avar siege (Theodore Synkellos and George of Pisidia) concentrated on their patron, Patriarch Sergios, as well as the spiritual object which he showed the enemy. In contrast to this, later anonymous report started to pay more attention to cult objects rather than to the procession and the patriarch. The spiritual arsenal became a focal point of later accounts, and, according to general opinion, the main tool of protection of Constantinople during the first and subsequent sieges.

Along with the acheiropoietos of Christ,⁵⁷ later reports on the Avar siege mentioned the relic of the True Cross. The main part of its fragments came to Constantinople from Jerusalem at the end of Herakleios's war against the Persians.⁵⁸ The actual cult of this relic therefore spread throughout Constantinople only after the end of the last war of antiquity, and thus it seems logical that the patriarch Sergios could not carry it in the ceremonial procession during the Avar siege.⁵⁹

However, later accounts attest to something different. The anonymous author of the *Historia Syntomos* states that Sergios carried, among other objects, "life-giving fragments of the Cross".⁶⁰ Also, historical prologues and homilies composed of the Feast of the Akathistos repeatedly mention the carrying of the True Cross during the Avar siege.⁶¹ Undoubtedly this conviction arose after further attacks on Constantinople, where this relic was used in liturgical processions.⁶² However, in contrast to other cases, this conviction has a more realistic historical foundation as the existence of this artefact in Constantinople was attested as early as in the fourth century onwards.⁶³ At the time of the Avar siege, there was evidently one or more fragments of the True Cross in the capital.⁶⁴ However, there is no information in eyewitness reports about their use in the spiritual defence of the city.

Another sacred object mentioned in the later reports on the Avar siege was generally labelled as the “esthes” (garment) of the Virgin Mary. Its precise nature is still disputed mainly because there appear various terms in the sources referring to Mary’s clothing.⁶⁵ According to later legends, the garment was brought to Constantinople from Jerusalem in the fifth century.⁶⁶ Still under the term “esthes”, this relic became a central spiritual object of the narration of its deposition after the Avar attack on the outskirts of Constantinople in 623. Out of fear its destruction, the city’s inhabitants took it from the Church of the Theotokos of Blachernai and placed in the Hagia Sophia.⁶⁷ However, this relic, now usually referred to as the Virgin’s robe, was not a part of the spiritual arsenal of Constantinople at that time as the Avar attacks of 623 and 626 clearly reveal. It has a central role in the narration of the first Avar attack, but only as a respected Marian cult object. There is no mention of its “protecting” role, and the unnamed patriarch appeals to the Theotokos herself to save the endangered city.⁶⁸

During the Avar siege in 626, the main protective symbol of the city was the acheiropoietos of Christ. The patriarch Sergios clearly copied the practice of the Roman armies, which considered such images to be military banners of a spiritual kind. Neither the robe nor any other part of Mary’s vestment was used in such a way, and Sergios did not have any reason to use this relic in a liturgical procession to drive off the Avars.

Nonetheless, later historical prologues to the Akathistos assert the opposite. These sources emerged after the end of iconoclasm and fully reflect the intensification of the Marian cult in Byzantium. They reveal that Sergios carried the “revered garment” (esthes) of the Mother of God in his procession with other sacred relics.⁶⁹ At the end of the fourteenth century, the Russian pilgrim Alexander the Clerk visited Constantinople and labelled this relict as the robe (riza) which he saw in the Church of the Mother of God in Blachernai.⁷⁰ It was probably local guides who told him of the legendary rescue from the enemy attack in the times of the patriarch Sergios.⁷¹

THE ICON FROM THE HODEGON MONASTERY

Thus far, the history of the spiritual arsenal of Constantinople mentioned in later accounts of the Avar siege has been discussed, and relatively little space has been devoted to icons: those cult objects painted on wooden panels. Did they play any role during the Avar siege? Answering this ques-

tion is complicated due to the terminology used by contemporary authors. It is known that before the arrival of the Avars, the patriarch Sergios placed images of the Mother of God on the gates of the Theodosian Walls. The author of this report, Theodore Synkellos, mentioned that the patriarch “painted the holy likenesses of the Virgin on images (eikonas), who like the sun repels the darkness with rays of light and carries in her arms the Lord, to whom she gave birth”.⁷² Iconographically, they would correspond with the later Hodegetria type. However, these images were a spontaneous reaction to the threat posed by the Avars. The patriarch “painted” them or rather got some painters to do it. Therefore, they could not have been revered cult objects. Sergios had images of Mary hung in the manner of military standards which were then unfolded above the city gates. The short amount of time for the preparation of these images and their method of use suggest that they were most likely painted on cloth. The main role in Sergios’s procession was undisputedly played by the acheiropoietos of Christ. Even though there is nothing known about what this looked like, it can be assumed that the patriarch presented to the Avars an image painted on cloth rather than a typical wooden icon.⁷³

In later testimonies about the Avar siege composed after the end of iconoclasm, the Marian icons acquired a new and unanticipated status. The inhabitants and clergy looked to them in times of crisis and attributed to them a decisive role in saving the city. Similarly, it was believed that this function was fulfilled by icons from time immemorial, which was simply a piece of fiction emerging from the late Byzantine tradition. The most well-known Constantinople icon was the Hodegetria.⁷⁴ Its story is connected to the Hodegon Monastery, which was situated above the Bosphorus in the eastern outskirts of Constantinople.⁷⁵ Like other such cases, the history of the Hodegetria has been influenced by the legends which formed around it. It was generally believed that the icon was painted by Saint Luke, thus projecting its origins back to the beginnings of Christianity.⁷⁶ In fact, the first indisputable mention of the Hodegetria comes from the beginning of the twelfth century.⁷⁷

At the time of the Komnenian dynasty, the Hodegetria was the personal palladium of the emperor and his family.⁷⁸ But it played a protective role for Constantinople for the first time only in 1187 during the attack of the usurper Alexios Branas. According to the contemporary Byzantine historian Niketas Choniates, Emperor Isaac II Angelos (1185–1195) placed the Hodegetria on the walls to protect Constantinople.⁷⁹ At this time, the icon was recognized and revered object and an integral part of the spiritual

arsenal of the city. This is precisely documented by other contemporary Byzantine historian Eustathios of Thessalonica, who said that in Constantinople there was a general attitude that the Hodegetria as “protectress of our city, will be enough, without anyone else, to secure our welfare”.⁸⁰

Therefore, it is understandable that the Byzantine tradition ascribed the Hodegetria retrospective effect while praising its miraculous intervention back to the siege of 626. However, the contemporary witnesses of the Avar attack knew nothing about its existence. Only in the late eleventh century, an anonymous Latin pilgrim mentioned that the Hodegetria played key role in one unspecified siege of Constantinople conducted by two armies. At that time, the people carried this venerated icon through the city imploring mercy from the Mother of God.⁸¹ Although the local Byzantine guides who informed the pilgrim could merge different sieges into one, the mention of two armies most closely resembles the Avar and Persian siege of in 626.

The late Byzantine reports of the Avar siege did not mention any specific icon. In the Menologion of Emperor Basil II, the salvation of the city is only ascribed to an unnamed icon of the Mother of God.⁸² Also, the anonymous *Synopsis chronike* from the second half of the thirteenth century mentions the carrying of an icon during the Avar attack.⁸³ Only in the historical prologue to the Feast of the Akathistos (*Lectio Triodii*), only traditionally dated to the fourteenth century, the Hodegetria is explicitly mentioned; however, this is only in connection with the Arab siege of 717/718.⁸⁴ The retrospective projection of this sacral object back to the Avar siege could be, however, attested in the visual form in the fourteenth century. On one miniature preserved in the Church Slavonic version of the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses, the emperor Herakleios entrusts the Constantinople to the protection of this icon before his Persian campaign.⁸⁵ At this time, the Hodegetria had been a long-standing focus of regular processions in Constantinople.⁸⁶ Many illustrations, mostly on wall paintings in Orthodox churches in today’s Serbia, Macedonia, and Greece, preserved a visualization of this religious ceremony.⁸⁷

The processions with the icon of the Hodegetria during the siege of Constantinople are last mentioned in 1422 and 1453.⁸⁸ After conquest of the city by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, the icon was destroyed by janissaries, who hacked it into four pieces.⁸⁹ The spiritual protector had not been able to exhibit its miraculous power, even though the faithful



Fig. 14.1 The icon of Panhagia Myrovlitissa (Dionysiou Monastery, Athos); photograph by Martin Hurbanič

had prayed to it and they attributed it the supernatural intervention which had saved Constantinople from the Avars so many centuries earlier.⁹⁰

As is the case with such objects, the heavenly aura of Hodegetria was transferred to other icons which are now found in many places in Europe.⁹¹ Today the Panhagia Myrovlitissa, an icon which is believed to have helped to save Constantinople from the Avars, is venerated in the Dionysiou Monastery on Mount Athos (Fig. 14.1).

However, this icon has little in common with that siege and typologically does not resemble the Hodegetria. Nonetheless, the legend and connected miracle have influenced the human mind much more than the material object itself. The tradition has triumphed over history as the story has over the material object. The miraculous legend is eternal because it reflects human desires and belief in supernatural miracles whose fulfilment is repeatedly expected.

NOTES

1. Theodore Synkellos, 305.21–26.
2. Theophanes, 503.5–14.
3. Theodore Synkellos, 305.14–16; cf. also Speck 2003, 267.
4. Cf. Janin 1966, 69–88; Baldovin 1987, 167–171; Berger 2001, 73–87; Bauer 2001, 27–61, in this connection esp. 50–59.
5. Meier 2003a, 494–496.
6. For the sources, cf. Baldovin 1987, 186–188.
7. For a summarization of these attacks, cf. Pfeilschifter 2013, 212–223.
8. Hurbanič 2011, 323–324.
9. *In depositionem pretiosae vestis* 3, 594–595.
10. Meier 2003a, 495.
11. Cf. Nilsson 1916, 318–321; Baldovin 1987, 236–237.
12. Wolf 1990, 3.
13. Theodore Synkellos, 304.36–305.12. For this concept, cf. Hurbanič 2016, 271–293.
14. Speck 1980, 8, 27–29 and 2003, 267–268; Pentcheva 2002, 4–9 and 2006, 38–42.
15. *The Chronicle of Ps.-Joshua the Stylite*, 48, 74.
16. Prokopios *Bella*, 2.11.14 – 2.11.23, 200–201; Evagrius, 4.26, 172–174. Cf. Meier 2003a, 365–373.
17. Evagrius, 4.26, 172–174.
18. Dobschütz 1899, 1–3.
19. Dobschütz 1899, 16.
20. Dobschütz 1899, 11–12.
21. Wolf 1990, 3.
22. Cf. Nilsson 1955, 435.
23. Kruse 1934; Belting 1990, 117–122; Gogola 2017, 41–46.
24. Dobschütz 1899, 37–39; Belting 1990, 69.
25. Kitinger 1954, 119; Trilling 1998, 109; Brubaker – Haldon 2011, 11–15; 35–36; 55–56.
26. For the comparison of icons and relics, cf. Wortley 2002/3, 163–174.
27. Dobschütz 1899, 264–267; Belting 1990, 69.
28. Theodosius, 7, 141.12–17 (Jerusalem); Antoninus Placentinus, 22, 174.5–9 (Jerusalem) and 44, 129.9–14 (Memphis).
29. Evagrius, 4.27, 175.6–17; cf. also Prokopios *Bella*, 2.26–2.27, 268–282. On this episode: Dobschütz 1899, 118–120; Runciman 1929, 243–244; Kitinger 1954, 103, 110; Av. Cameron 1983, 84–85; 1998, 39; Chrysostomides 1997, XXVII–XXVIII; Drijvers 1998, 18–22; Meier 2003a 387–401; Guscini 2009, 170–173 and 2016, 23–27.

30. Dobschütz 1899, 117; Runciman 1929, 244; Mich. Whitby 2000a, 323–326 and 2000b, 90–91; Illert 2007, 67; Guscini 2009, 170–173, and 2016, 23–27.
31. Speck 1998, 120–121; Chrysostomides 1997, XXVII–XXVIII.
32. Cf. Kitzinger 1954, 104.
33. Egeria, 19.11–13, 63.
34. Illert (2007, 27) tries to place this episode in the context of the Roman–Persian war of 260.
35. George of Pisidia *Bellum Avaricum*, v. 373, 180.
36. Kitzinger 1954, 112; Pertusi 143 a 220–221; Van Dieten 1972, 15, esp. 174–178; Speck 1980, 27–29 and 2003, 266–271.
37. Schlumberger 1917, 6; Stratos: 1968, 184.
38. Ps.-Zachariah Rhetor, 12.4, 425–427; cf. also George Kedrenos, 685.1–4; cf. Dobschütz 1899, 40–50; Meier 2003b, 237–250.
39. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 2.3.4, 73–2.3.9, 74 and 3.1.11–3.1.12, 111.
40. Whether it was a copy of the Kamoulia (Dobschütz 1899, 51–52), the Image of Edessa (Guscini 2009, 207–208 and 2016, 32), or some other acheiropoietos is impossible to prove.
41. Brubaker 1998, 1229; Brubaker and Haldon 2011, 55.
42. cf. Schreiner 1985, 261, n. 211, and 270, n. 300.
43. Kitzinger 1954, 126; Belting 1990, 122–125.
44. Speck 1988, 54 and 2003, 266.
45. George of Pisidia *Expeditio Persica* 1, v. 139–140, 80; cf. also Theophanes, 303.17–24; cf. Dobschütz 1899, 53–54; Van Dieten 1972, 15.
46. Wolf 1990, 4.
47. George of Pisidia *Expeditio Persica* 2, v. 99–100, 94.
48. Theodore Synkellos, 304–305.12.
49. Theodore Synkellos, 304.
50. Dobschütz 1899, 8.
51. Kitzinger 1954, 83–150; Brubaker 1995, 1–24; Meier 2003a, 528f.
52. Claude 1969, 141; Meier 2003a, 558–559.
53. *Historia Syntomos*, 334.18–20.
54. *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Lipsiensis R II 25), col. 873–874.48; cf. Pentcheva 2002, 23 and 2006, 50.
55. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1356D.
56. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1349C–D.; Antonios of Larissa, 132.19–25.
57. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1357A; *Historia Syntomos*, 334; *Synaxarium Ecclesiae Constantinopolitanae* (Lipsiensis R II 25), col. 873–874.48–49; *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1349C; Antonios of Larissa, 132.19–20.
58. Klein 2004, 35–43.
59. Van Dieten 1972, 175.
60. *Historia Syntomos*, 334.21.

61. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1357A; *Historia Syntomos*, 334.21; *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1349C; Antonios of Larissa, 132.21–22.
62. For the Arab siege of 717/718, cf. *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1365C; *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352D; Letter from Germanos to Pope Gregory II (149A–B). On this, Speck 1981, 162–163; Klein 2004, 47; Stephen of Taron, 2.4.130, 192; cf. also Gero 1973, 38. For the siege of 822, cf. Joseph Genesios, 2.5, 28.43–49; Theophanes Continuatus (lib. 1–4), 2.14bis, 88.1–10; John Skylitzes, 34.78–85; cf. also Klein 2004, 54.
63. For these examples, see Klein 2004, 32–34 and 2006, 81 and 89.
64. George Kedrenos, 685; Michael the Syrian 10.2, 284–285. Cf. Meier 2003b, 237–250. Cf. also Theophylaktos Simokattes, 5.16.11, 220.
65. Cf. the discussion on this problem by Maguire 2011, 43–47.
66. Ebersolt 1921, 45–47; Baynes 1955, 240–247; Wenger, 1955, 111–136; Belting-Ihm 1976, 38–57; Wortley, 2005, 179–187.
67. One can only speculate if the so-called *esthes* was the same as the *peristolia* mentioned by Theophylaktos Simokattes (8.5.2, 291.27) when describing the end of the rule of Emperor Maurikios. Cf. also Wortley 2005, 179–180. The term “pallium” used by Gregory of Tours (1.9, 44) can hardly refer to the robe. Only in the Life of Saint Theodore of Sykeon (128, 103.12–13) it is mentioned that the monastery of that saint received a piece of the “maphorion” of the Virgin among other precious relics commissioned by patrician Domniziolos.
68. *In depositionem pretiosae vestis*, 610–611.
69. For the use of *esthes*/garment during the Arab siege of Constantinople in 717/718: *Diegesis Ophelimos*, col. 1357A; *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1349D; *Historia Syntomos* 334.20–21. Cf. *Hymnus Sancte Dei Genitricis Marie*, § 1, (pallium). For the siege of the Thomas the Slav in 821/822, cf. Joseph Genesios, 2.5, 28.43–49; John Skylitzes, 34.78–85; Theophanes Continuatus (lib. 1–4), 2.14bis, 88.1–10. For the Russian siege of 860, cf. the Chapter “The Sacred Iconography of the Siege”.
70. Alexander the Clerk, 163.
71. Alexander the Clerk, 163.
72. Theodore Synkellos, 304.6–8.
73. George of Pisidia *Heraclius* 2, v. 12–18, 210; Theophanes, 298.16–17 (referring to George of Pisidia, but he mentioned several images). Cf. Speck 1988, 54 and 2003, 266; Pentcheva 2002, 15.
74. Belting 1990, 87–91; Angelidi and Papamastorakis 2000, 373–397; Baltoyanni 2000, 144–147, Pentcheva 2006, 109–143; Wortley 2005, 171–174.
75. Janin 1969, 199–200. Berger 1988, 378; Lidov 2000, 48–49; Angelidi and Papamastorakis 2000, 376.
76. For this tradition, cf. Belting 1990, 87; Pentcheva 2006, 120–127.

77. *Anonymus Mercati* 4, 249. The account of an anonymous English pilgrim is based on the older Greek archetype written after 1063, cf. Ciggaar 1996, 148.
78. Angelidi and Papamastorakis 2000, 379–380.
79. Niketas Choniates, 382.55–57; Frolow 1944, 103.
80. Eustathios of Thessalonica, 42.11–12 (English translation on 42).
81. *Anonymus Tarragonensis*, 128.392–400.
82. *Miraculum Mariae*, col. 576A.
83. *Synopsis Chronike*, 108.26.
84. *Lectio Triodii*, col. 1352D.
85. Dujčev 1962, fig. 43.
86. Oikonomides 1991, 40; Ševčenko 1995, 549; Angelidi and Papamastorakis 2000, 383–385; Baltoyanni 2000, 147 and Pentcheva 2006, 129–136.
87. Pätzold 1989, 42; Ševčenko 1995, 551.
88. Joseph Bryennios, 409; Doukas, 38.10, 339, 341; Michael Kritoboulos, A.45.1–5, 58–59.
89. Doukas, 39.15, 363.
90. Doukas, 36.4, 317.
91. Wolf 1948, 328.

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Conclusion

(The siege of Constantinople) does not represent a noticeable event in the history of Byzantium and very few people know about it. However, it is interesting that the Slavs, the Bulgars and others, maybe also the Russians took part in it.¹

In 1914, these words appeared in one popular Russian journal when the world was standing on the verge of the First World War. Compared to the upcoming four years of horrors and cataclysms, the ten-day siege of the Byzantine capital must appear for many as an insignificant event in the history of Europe. Although the author of this quotation, the otherwise unattested E. E. Tevyashov, could not see over the horizon of the period, his austere judgement comes as a bit of a surprise. Tevyashov not only denied the importance of the Avar siege for the history of Byzantium, but he even tried to link it to the earliest history of the Eastern Slavs. Few decades later, his view was revitalized and further developed by the Ukrainian archaeologist and historian J. E. Borovskiy who based his conclusions predominantly on later Byzantine, Church Slavonic, and Georgian sources.² These reports describe the attackers not as Avars or Slavs, but as Scythians or Tauroscythians. But such a labelling can hardly be treated as a serious argument in support of the participation of the Eastern Slavs in the Avar siege, for it is well known that Byzantine authors often ascribed ancient names to various groups of people or transposed current names into the deep past.

A typical example of this transformation can be found in two Byzantine chronicles from the thirteenth century. They both contained short entries on the Avar siege but present it as an attack by the Scythians, some of whom supposedly attacked the city on Russian monoxyles.³ In the Church Slavonic tradition, such a link with the Avar siege appears only in the Chronicle of Constantine Manasses. A marginal note preserved on one of its manuscripts identified the name Tauroscythians, originally used in the Greek original, with Russians.⁴ Therefore, it seems clear that Borovskiy let himself be misled by later Byzantine and Church Slavonic tradition.⁵ His predecessor Tevyashov disregarded the tradition altogether, although it was respected by the Russian Orthodox Church, which recalled the memory of the Avar siege during the Feast of the Akathistos. Tevyashov must have perceived the Avar attack as a single isolated event, omitting its importance within the last war of antiquity. His scepticism was shared by several later historians. G. Finlay, an important Scottish historian and a participant in the Greek war for independence, maintained that the Byzantines gained their victory with their own forces, without the help of Emperor Herakleios who did not consider it important enough to come and help the besieged capital.⁶ In 1960, P. Lemerle, the well-known French Byzantinist, also claimed that Constantinople was in no great danger, since contemporary authors intentionally exaggerated the impact of the siege.⁷ Even for the great E. Gibbon, the Avar siege was only a single episode in the last war between Rome and Persia, which had been completely overshadowed by the triumph of Mohammed and his followers.⁸ But these are very isolated views, since many past and present historians have claimed the contrary. The author of the first monograph on Emperor Herakleios, the French historian L. Drapeyron, wrote of a “heroic tragedy” ending with the triumph of the Greeks.⁹ The Irish historian J. Bury considered the Avar attack as the first serious threat that the city of Constantinople had to face since its foundation.¹⁰

At the beginning of the twentieth century, A. D. Mordtmann, an expert on the topography of Istanbul, described the Byzantine victory as memorable.¹¹ The Greek Byzantinist A. Stratos calls it one among the noblest episodes in the history of that era.¹² The American Orientalist and expert on seventh-century Byzantine history W. Kaegi writes about the most important moment in more than thirty years of Herakleios’s rule.¹³

The victory before the walls of Constantinople was neither expected nor easy. It was born in the middle of a long war waged on two fronts in which the Eastern Roman Empire often stood on the verge of destruction.

However, this triumph was more than just an episode in this drama that ended in salvation, as another historian, B. Tsangadas, has put it.¹⁴ It was the key episode of the last war of antiquity, as was stressed by the English historian J. Howard-Johnston.¹⁵ Let us, at least theoretically, suppose what would have happened if the Avars and their allies had managed to win. Constantinople would have turned into ruins, and even though the Avars would have left soon afterwards, they would have surely taken everything valuable and captured a large number of the city's inhabitants. The fall of the centre of the empire would have been an unimaginable psychological blow to the morale of Herakleios's army. And there would have been more. Persian armies Shahrbaraz and Shahen would have been able to stay in the rich and urbanized western part of Asia Minor for a long time, while Herakleios would have remained isolated with his small army in the north-eastern part of that peninsula. It is very questionable whether he would have succeeded in persuading the Turks to become his allies. As W. Kaegi already stressed, the fall of Constantinople would have most probably meant the fatal blow for the empire, and the possible negative consequences of this attack would have been much worse than in 1204.¹⁶ There is no doubt that the siege and its immediate context meant a definitive turn in the last Roman–Persian war. Herakleios's victory over Shahen in the spring or early summer of 626 marred the possibility of the effective coordination of the Avars and Persians and largely decreased the threat of an allied attack on Constantinople. With this victory, the emperor eliminated the most elite core, which the Persian king had mobilized to definitively and triumphantly finish this lengthy war. Moreover, the failure of the Avars enabled Herakleios to adopt a strategic initiative, which he managed to preserve until the end of his military operations.

Considering just the military aspects of the siege, one can only speculate about how serious the immediate threat to the capital could have been. In the initial phase of the siege, the khagan tried to concentrate on the frangible central area of the Theodosian Walls, but after the first major attack, he refrained from any other serious attempts in that sector. The Avars' attempts to coordinate with the Persian army, standing on the other side of the Bosphorus, failed as well. However, as the mighty leader of an ethnically heterogeneous army, the khagan did not want to lose his accumulated political and military prestige. In the last phase, he focused on the weaker Blachernai sector, which was fortified from the land side even though the famous shrine of the Theotokos remained unprotected during the siege. The position of the ships of the Constantinopolitan defence

forces as well as the subsequent attack of the monoxyles suggests the possible absence at least part of the sea wall along the Golden Horn.

The bold plan of the Avar khagan to rely on coordinated action from land and sea failed, but only after a hard fight. One can only imagine what would have happened after a successful attack of the monoxyles through the defensive line in the Golden Horn. Given the present state of knowledge, it is impossible to determine whether such a penetration would have led to the overall collapse of defences in Constantinople or only to a limited sacking of those parts, which had not yet been fully integrated into the fortification structure of the capital. The important factor of nature in the final naval struggle in the form of a sudden storm should also be taken into consideration. At any rate, the inhabitants of Constantinople perceived it as a sign from heaven, cementing their belief that God and his Mother stood on the side of the Christians in this war.

THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE, THE AVARS, AND THE SLAVS

As G. Finlay wrote, the siege of Constantinople in 626 was the last venture of the Avar khaganate that was noted down by Byzantine historians.¹⁷ At the time of the departure of the Avars from Thrace, such idea would have hardly been imaged by any of the eyewitnesses. The khagan had promised that he would return and make the inhabitants of Constantinople pay for all the supposed hardships inflicted upon him, but neither he nor his successors managed to fulfil his promise. Such defeat was therefore something more than a matter of psychology. Although the Avars must have suffered significant material and human losses, their major defeat was the loss of their superpower status in the Balkans. From 626, the khaganate found itself trapped in internal turmoil, and its previous cultural heterogeneity would completely disappear.¹⁸

August 626 brought the end of a whole era characterized by the domination of fast nomad cavalry who were able to advance as much as 60 kilometres per day and whose surprise attacks were almost impossible for opponents to respond to for a long time.¹⁹ The Avars stopped their looting raids in the Balkans and very soon completely disappeared from the awareness of Byzantine writers. But, except for Constantinople or possibly Thessalonica, there was not much left to plunder. Therefore, it is not surprising that after 626 no Byzantine authors recorded any further Avar incursions across the Danube or diplomatic messages from their khagans. Until then, Constantinople had been regularly visited by their envoys, not

only coming to collect annual tribute but also to remind the Roman emperors of their duties and bonds towards the khagan. Starting from 558, the empire had, according to estimates, paid as much as six(!) million *solidi* to the Avars, equalling 27,000 kilograms of gold.²⁰ However, these are only technical calculations. Despite the plenitude of gold in Avar graves from that era, the tax seems to have been paid mainly in silver and precious clothes, as Theophylaktos Simokattes explicitly noted in this matter.²¹ The duty of tribute was valid only until the siege of 626, which stresses the importance of the victory before the walls of Constantinople. After this period, mainly imitations of imperial coins were to be found in Avar graves.²²

Probably the last payment was provided to the Avars around 635, when Mary, the sister of Emperor Herakleios, decided to offer them a ransom for her son Stephen, who was being held prisoner in the khaganate.²³ A little bit later, several other important imperial hostages returned home, including John, the illegitimate son of Herakleios, also known by his Gothic-sounding name Athalarichos. These Roman court dignitaries had been living in Avar captivity for a decade or even longer. They had been handed over to the Avars at the turn of 623/624 by Herakleios to guarantee the new treaty. However, Athalarichos did not enjoy his return home for a very long time. The difficult situation in the empire, which faced Arab incursions, and the deteriorating health of his father aroused Athalarichos's lust for power. Sometime around 637, he was involved in a conspiracy, for which he had his nose and hands cut off, and he was sent into exile for the rest of his life.²⁴ We have no information whatsoever of the second important released hostage, Stephen. Unfortunately, he did not leave any written testimony, nor did he share his experiences with any of the literary gifted members of the court. He could have—more than anyone else—disclosed many valuable details about the organization of Avar society and how it functioned; indeed, information on that society has mainly been acquired only through material evidence from Avar graves. As W. Pohl aptly remarked, the Avars are revived for us only after their death.²⁵

The last report on the presence of Avar envoys in Constantinople comes from 678. Remarkably enough, this time they did not come as arrogant tribute collectors but rather to congratulate Emperor Constantine IV to his successful defence of Constantinople against the Arabs.²⁶ No more than three years passed, and the empire had to acknowledge the presence of new nomads on its territory. In the eyes of the Byzantine elites, the

Bulgars, led by Asparukh and his successors, became a problem of primary importance for the Balkans, pushing previous attackers definitively into the past. The Avars disappeared without a trace, vanishing in the newly formed Bulgar Khanate—at least according to the Constantinopolitan patriarch Nicholas Mystikos, who mentioned this to the self-designated Bulgar emperor Symeon a few centuries later.²⁷

The Avar attack on Constantinople also meant the peak of Slavic raids into the Balkan provinces of the empire that had started during the era of Justinian and his historian Prokopios of Kaisareia. The weakening of the Avar khaganate after 626 had a large influence on the Carpathian Basin and the western part of the Balkans; however, Slavic colonization in other parts of the peninsula had been almost completed earlier—probably in the first decade of Herakleios's rule. The civilization of the weak (the Byzantines) had triumphed against much stronger opponents—such is the evaluation of the Avar siege by F. Barišić.²⁸ But does this suggestion apply to the Slavs? Sailing on their monoxyles, they lost the Battle of Constantinople, but at the same time, they had symbolically won the war in the Balkans.

CONSTANTINOPLE AND THE BYZANTINE MENTALITY

The victory over the Avars and their allies fully established Constantinople as the most important spiritual centre of the fragmented empire. Thenceforth, the emerging “Byzantine” identity definitively started to be fixed on its capital and the residing emperor.²⁹ The miraculous victory in the Golden Horn convinced the inhabitants of Constantinople that their salvation had come about only through the intervention of the Mother of God.³⁰ Their capital truly became the Theotokoupolis only in the aftermath of the Avar siege and remained so until its fall in 1453. The form of this cult reflected the ancient antique concept of a city as a holy precinct with its own divine patron.³¹ Unlike Rome, the new capital on the Bosphorus could not rely upon the apostolic tradition, and although it gradually became the home of saints and the resting place of their mortal remains, only the monopolization of the Marian cult maintained its enhanced spiritual position in the Christian world. However, would anything similar have been possible had Constantinople failed in its first serious test and been conquered? Would the Eastern Roman Empire have survived without its centre, styling itself as the New Rome? All subsequent failed attempts to subdue this capital only reinforced the idea of its invin-

cibility, originating in the first and truly Byzantine victory in the summer days of 626. The historical tradition of the Avar attack supported the belief in divine help for the inhabitants of Constantinople, coming in the direst of times, and motivated their resistance. In times of potential crises, this awareness was strengthened by ritual invocations to the divine patroness of the city. These efforts eventually transformed into suppliant processions in the streets of Constantinople and along the strong city walls.

In the aftermath of the Avar siege, the inhabitants of Constantinople started to believe that their city had its own divine patroness and a whole spiritual arsenal which was ready to help in times of danger. Its first relic was the image of Christ not made by human hands that the Constantinopolitan patriarch Sergios had used in a liturgical procession as a symbolical shield of the city. After the victory over the Avars, the Mother of God acquired a prominent position together with her main shrine in Blachernai. Various parts of her clothing together with the relic of the True Cross were considered as the protective palladia of Constantinople during later sieges. These religious practices and the spiritual arsenal have their origin in 626. This fact can be illustrated by the story of the most famous protective object in the capital—the Hodegetria. Although the existence of this icon can only be documented from the late eleventh century, the tradition significantly moved its emergence deep into the past and ascribed to it the main role in the first salvation of Constantinople during the Avar attack.

This belief is clearly documented by the Byzantine historian Doukas when describing the last days of Constantinople prior to the Ottoman siege in 1453. After the formal promulgation of the Florentine union in the Hagia Sophia, the discontented crowd dispersed into local inns, where the ordinary people raised their cups to the intercession of this icon which had already proven its help against the khagan and the Saracens.³² In the minds of common believers, the Hodegetria represented the divine patroness herself and could cause a miracle on its own. Such a belief was the consequence of the ecclesiastical tradition that highlighted the role of this sacred object in the defence of Constantinople following iconoclasm.

THE AKATHISTOS

The survival of historical awareness of the Avar attack would not be conceivable without the Feast of the Akathistos. The history of this hymn documented how a relatively limited liturgical commemoration could

become a part of the most important Marian feast in late Byzantium. Due to the popularity of that hymn, the memory of the Avar attack, despite its transformed and legendary form, spread far across the borders of the Byzantine Empire, as documented by liturgical texts as well as wall paintings and icons which are still visible in various Orthodox countries of the former Byzantine oikoumene. The memory of the first three miraculous salvations of Constantinople recalled during liturgical services for the Feast of the Akathistos became a symbol of hope for Orthodox Christians, convincing them that they should not despair even in the direst of times. According to a widely accepted notion, the Mother of God saved Constantinople in time of despair and threats from all directions, so why would she not deliver similar miracle against the new Ottoman threat? The iconographical depictions of the scene of the miraculous salvation of Constantinople preserved in the churches of Macedonia and Moldavia contain a hidden symbolical meaning of a timeless miracle and faith in its repetition, and they evidently served to promote anti-Ottoman sentiments in those principalities. In all countries of the Byzantine oikoumene, such depictions became the symbol of hope and faith in the miracle of the Mother of God, which has been revived with unmistakable regularity every fifth Saturday of Great Lent up to the present day in the Greek-Orthodox liturgy. Looking back at all that has been said, the Avar attack cannot be treated as neglected and almost unknown historical event anymore.

NOTES

1. Tevjashov 1914, 229.
2. Borovskiy 1988, 114–119.
3. *Synopsis chronike*, 108.19; Theodore Skoutariotes, 2199, 122.8.
4. Konstantin Manasi, 133. n. 18. Cf. also Dujčev 1972, 112–113.
5. Borovskiy 1988, 117.
6. Finlay 1877, 337.
7. Lemerle 1960, 348.
8. Gibbon 1788, 518–521.
9. Drapeyron 1869, 220, 239.
10. Bury 1889, 241.
11. Mordtmann 1903, 28.
12. Stratos 1968, 173.
13. Kaegi 2003, 141.
14. Tsangadas 1980, 85.

15. Howard-Johnston 1995, 131 and 2010, 65.
16. Kaegi 2003, 147; cf. also Meško 2016, 119–134.
17. Finlay 1877, 337.
18. Vida 2008, 31.
19. Bóna 2000, 166; Curta 2015, 70–75.
20. For various calculations, cf. Kovačević 1977, 150; Kiss 1986, 109; Pohl 1988, 280–281 and n. 32; Göckenjan 1993, 284 and Hardt 2003, 99–100.
21. Theophylaktos Simokattes, 1.3.7, 45.12–13.
22. Kovačević 1977, 151. For the circulation of the Byzantine gold coins before and after 626, cf. Somogyi 2008 96–100 (Figures 1–5).
23. Nikephoros, 21, 70.32–36.
24. Nikephoros, 24, 72.8–18.
25. Pohl 1988, 13.
26. Theophanes, 356.2–6; Nikephoros 34, 86.30–37.
27. Nicholas Mystikos 10, 70.20–45.
28. Barišić 1954, 394.
29. Cf. Koder 2004, 408–419.
30. Frolow 1944, 97 and 118.
31. Brown 1973, 21–22; Meier 2003, 527.
32. Doukas, 36.4, 317.

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